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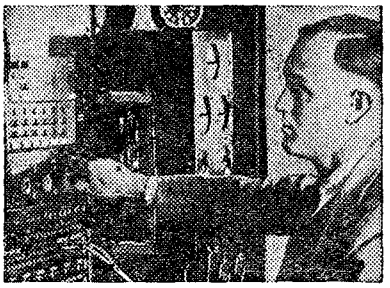

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Hell Island

Long Novelette

By EUSTACE L. ADAMS
Author of "Anywhere But Here," "Alcatraz Bound," etc.

It was a case of kill or be killed

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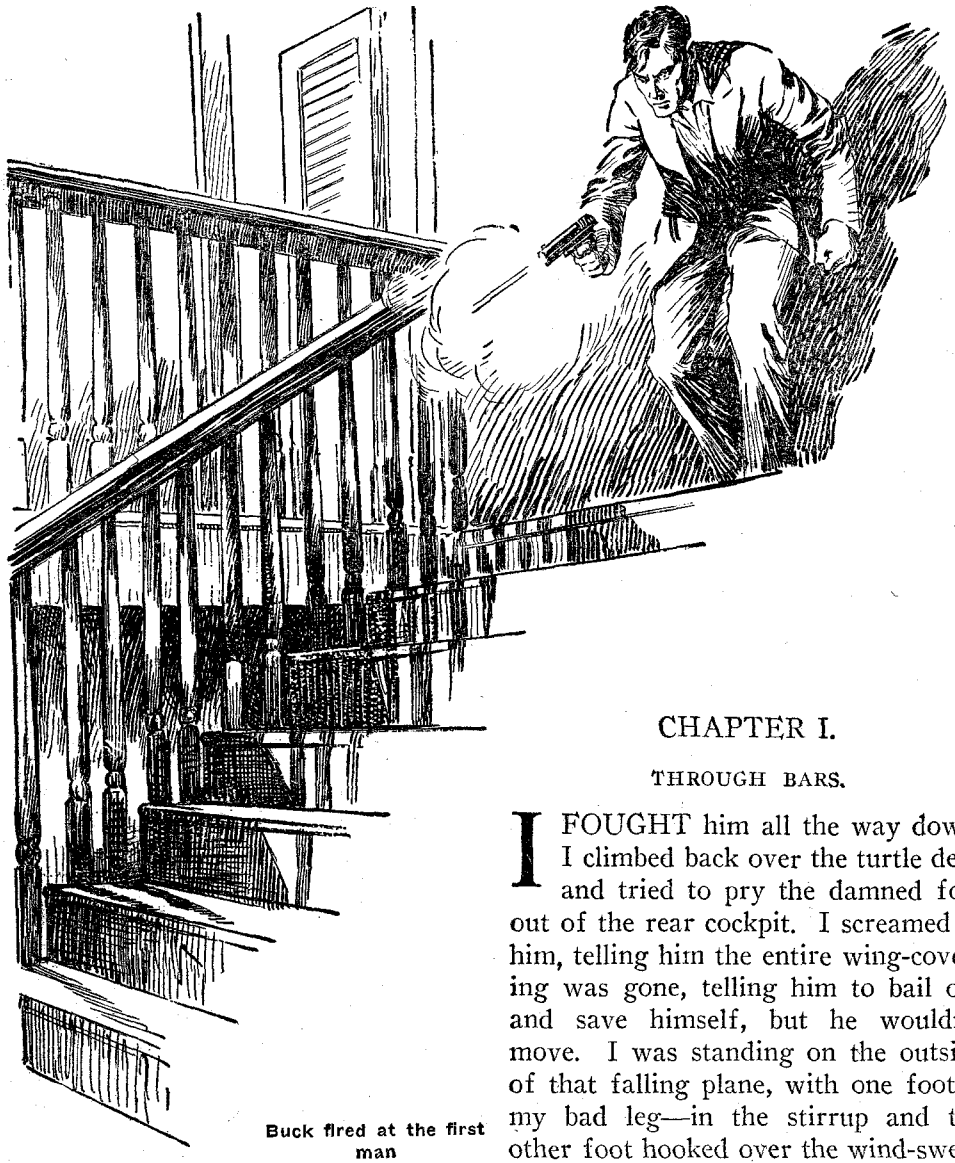

Buck fired at the first man

They said he was yellow—yet he battled the toughest assortment of gunmen, strike-breakers and cut-throats this port ever knew

CHAPTER I.

THROUGH BARS.

I FOUGHT him all the way down. I climbed back over the turtle deck and tried to pry the damned fool out of the rear cockpit. I screamed at him, telling him the entire wing-covering was gone, telling him to bail out and save himself, but he wouldn't move. I was standing on the outside of that falling plane, with one foot—my bad leg—in the stirrup and the other foot hooked over the wind-swept cowling. My passenger was hitting at me with frantic fists as we plummeted down through that last thousand feet. I had him by the hair, trying to yank him out of the seat, when my foot slipped out of the stirrup and the wing hurled me off into space.

I had no time to figure out that I would be better dead than alive. Automatically my fingers grabbed at the release ring, and it wasn't until my 'chute

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opened that I realized what people might think.

Even at that, it never once occurred to me that my brother instructors might not believe me. "Brother" instructors? Brothers, my eye! They tore my heart out and made me eat it!

Oh, they didn't blame me for the crash. Even Elena Jiminez didn't blame me for that, and the man who went down in the wreck had been her brother. She, and all the rest of them on the ground, had seen the fabric peel off the right wing like skin from a rotten peach. But I had deserted Juan Jiminez in the air, the Pilots' Association said, and of course that finished me. I had bailed out, they decided, leaving my passenger, a non-flyer, to die in the crash. I was a coward, and it was "so stated in the bond." They had not seen me trying to pull the fool out of his seat. But I was alive, and Elena's brother was dead, and that was all there was to it.

I tried to tell them, of course, how I had worked for ten thousand screaming feet, trying to get him out, and how he had clawed at my face, the way Latins do, like a woman. But the minute I saw they weren't going to believe me, something happened to me inside. My stomach seemed to freeze. I had been flying Navy pursuit planes at Pensacola while most of them had been working up solo hours in training ships. I had quit the Navy to fly transports while they were punks, and now they were ruling me out of the air. A coward, eh?

I wasn't afraid of anything that had feet, wings or fins. And I told them so just before I picked up a chair and started to work my way through them to Low-wing Hendrix, whose testimony had turned the balance against me. He said he had been flying just above me and had seen me climb to the cowling and bail out.

This much I can say for the bunch. In spite of the way I worked them over—and it was plenty—they didn't order me arrested. That was the idea of the county cops who were hanging around the field watching the class in advanced acrobatics. Low-wing Hendrix was all for preferring charges of felonious assault against me. He had hated me ever since the first year I was out of the Service. We were flying transports on the Trans-Caribbean that year and he couldn't keep out of the passengers' cabin when any pretty girls were aboard. I told him he had the morals of a goat, and I licked him, right before the crowd in the Havana hangar. But the others wouldn't let him file charges. They had his head sewed up and told him to forget it.

I DIDN'T care whether he prosecuted or not. Nothing he, or any of them, could do to me now could hurt me any more. Or so I thought at that moment.

So the police turned me loose, a flyer without honor among his own breed. Oh, yes. Young Billy Leonard did try to defend me at the hearing. He reminded them of the time I had dumped my plane into the ocean to pick up some drowning guys, and of the time, down on the Mosquito Coast, when I had flown serum through the tail of a Caribbean hurricane, and of this and that, but it didn't do any good. By that time my stomach had turned into a ball of ice and I just told them all to go straight to hell. But even young Billy—whom I had taught to fly—turned on me when I picked up the chair and went in after Low-wing Hendrix. And it was he who clipped me with the rabbit punch after I had gone

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to work on Low-wing. At that, I guess it was just as well. If he hadn't, I would probably have killed somebody, feeling the way I did.

Two people came to see me that one night I spent in the County Jail. Young Billy Leonard came first. I told the turnkey to tell him and all the rest of the flyers in the world to go to hell. If they wanted to lick me, they could wait in front of the jug until I came out, and then I'd take them on, singly, or in bunches of five.

But when Elena Jiminez came, I couldn't refuse to see her. I had to see her, on account of what I had done to her brother. Curious, the way your mind gets twisted when everything that is part of your world slips off into a tail-spin. I almost had myself thinking that I did bail out, purposely, leaving the boy there to die. I almost had myself thinking that if I had climbed into his cockpit behind him and, bracing myself against the slipstream, boosted him up by the armpits, I might have thrown him out. But I couldn't. There wasn't time, I tell you. When the earth is mushrooming until you can see the white faces of the people staring up at you from the ground, there isn't time to try everything. You just have to do the easiest things first. And God knows, I had not thought of a thing but riding all the way down with him if I couldn't pry him out.

But now I had to see the boy's sister. I had to tell her how sorry I was. It had been terrible, her standing there and watching her own brother dive six feet into the ground. I knew how it was. I had never had a brother, but I I had seen plenty of my friends—practically all the good ones—go that way. And I knew exactly what they looked like, and felt like, when you dug them out from under the engine. Elena wasn't yet used to death. So no matter how she was feeling now, I would take it and not blame her.

She followed a cop in, slim and small and dark and so fragile-looking that you wouldn't have dreamed she could swing a big Apex 12-40 around the way she did. In a week or two she'd have her unlimited ticket. Well, I had done that much for her, anyway. I had seen that no student on the field had ever received more thorough training than she. And I had done one more thing for her—or to her: I had left her brother behind me, to die.

ONE look into her enormous black eyes and I knew I was in for it. She hated me. But I had to see it through. She was beautiful as she stood out there in the grim, gray corridor. No girls in the world can be more beautiful, or more ugly, than a Latin. She was one of the beauties. Spanish, really, she was. I remembered how she had told me that her great-great-grandfather had been sent by the king of Spain to do something in San Lorenzo, and he had loved it so well he had never gone home. Important people, the Jiminez family, in San Lorenzo, and this kid brother, I remembered with a deep ache in my heart, was the last Jiminez of them all. The last male, Jiminez, I mean, and the Latins set great store by such things. And now Elena, his sister, stood before me, hating me.

"Listen, Elena," I said wearily, "I'd like to tell you something first, and then you can say just what's on your mind. I wasn't trying to tell them that your brother turned yellow on me. I was just trying to explain why I couldn't get him out before the wind—"

"Of all the pilots in the world," she

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said in that rich, surprisingly deep voice of hers that was almost free of any Spanish accent, "I thought Juan would be safe with you. That's why I made him take a flight, just to see how safe it was in the air. And you jumped out and left him!"

"I didn't!"

"You did. Señor Hendrix told me, told everybody, he saw you."

"He's a damned liar. Someday, if I live long enough, I'll put my fingers on his windpipe and make him tell the truth. He—"

"Listen, Don Buck," she interrupted, pushing back her slick black hair with that nervous gesture I remembered so well. "When I came up from San Lorenzo to learn flying, I was very excited because I was assigned to your class and—"

Yes, I had attended to that myself, I thought dully, as she talked. I remembered how lovely and eager she had looked when she had come to the field, and how all the instructors—particularly Low-wing—had ganged me to get her assigned to their classes. Instead, I had actually tried to talk her out of learning to fly, she had looked so—well, so different from the hard-boiled girl flyers I knew. I told her to go back to San Lorenzo and to marry some *caballero* or, if she had to stay in New York on account of the troubles down there, to start a tea shop, or a dancing class—anything, I urged her, but try to master a job that would be too much for her, and that would do nothing but kill her if she stuck to it long enough.

But I hadn't noticed the firmness of her smooth young chin, handed down to her through a hundred generations of gallant Spanish adventurers. She had always wanted to fly, she insisted. Perhaps she could find some way to make use of her flying in helping her country through its troubles. And, to sum it all up, she was going to fly. If we at the Apex field couldn't, or wouldn't, teach her, she'd go over to the Comet outfit, where they'd be glad to take her gold pesos.

SO I had taken her into my class. The gang hadn't liked that much, but there was nothing they could do about it. I was chief pilot and I had never been one to stand for a lot of bellyaching. So I had taken her into my class and I have given her the business. Knowing Latins the way I did, I realized that it was one chance in a million she could stand up there and take it; but again I was wrong. She took the wallops as they came and ate them up. She had the Latin dash and fire, together with an intuitive sense of balance that may have come from a couple of centuries of horsemen among her ancestors. I wouldn't know just what made her that way, but she was one of those rare things in aviation: a woman pilot who was born to it.

There hadn't been too much trouble with the boys. Low-wing, of course, made his customary passes at her, but he and I had a quiet little talk behind the hangar. He didn't feel quite up to licking me that day, so we had an understanding. Either he let her alone or I took him apart to find out what made him that way. So he let her alone—at least, so far as I could see.

"I'd heard about you," she was going on, breathlessly, "ever since I decided to learn to fly. They told me you were the hardest man in flying, and the bravest, and the smoothest hand on a stick, and that when new stunts were invented in the air, you'd be the one to invent them. And while you were teaching me, I thought they had told the truth."

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She took a long breath. I could hear it hissing through her small, very white, teeth. Her bright red lips were quivering. I felt like hell. I tried to think of something to say. But just what would a mug say at a time like that?

"My brother Juan," she went on, "told me I was crazy to learn to fly, to think I could help my country in the air and—"

"So that's why you wanted to fly?" I asked her, curiously. "I always wondered. You never told me."

"I'm not telling you now," she snapped. She stamped her small foot against the concrete floor and tried to shake the iron bars of my cell. She might as well have tried to push over the Empire State Building. "Listen," she went on, rapidly. "I wanted Juan to know what it felt like to fly. I thought if you took him up it would seem no more dangerous than a voyage on the fruit boat coming north. So I finally persuaded him, and you left him behind you, and now he's dead."

"Listen, Elena," I said, miserably. "I couldn't do anything with him. He—he fought and—"

"And you," she cut in, "the—the—what-you-call-the plug-ugly who can fight any pilot on the field—you could not pick him up and—I hope you are proud of yourself!"

I was getting sore. She was rubbing my nose in it just a little too long.

"I'm sorry," I said, stiffly. "But if it should happen all over again, he'd still be dead. The only difference would be that I'd be dead with him."

Blood rushed into her clear olive cheeks. "I wish," she said, hotly, "that you had been this time. I shall hate you to the last cowardly breath you draw!"

I had had about enough, even from her. "Stop it!" I snapped at her. "You've said enough. Beat it. Go on home!"

Her eyes widened with an odd fixed stare. So that was it. I had seen that look before. You can see it long instants before it comes, if you notice. But I had no spare time, even then. I stepped back just as a bright thin sliver of light flicked down between the bars. It slit a long, clean gash in the lapel of my coat.

"It just goes to show," I said, slowly. "A San Lorenzan gentlewoman? Phooie!"

Her sharp blade skittered to the concrete floor. She made no effort to pick it up. She just stood there, staring in at me through the bars. And then she was gone. The white-hot anger that was boiling my blood gradually cooled. I sat down on my stool and watched the door through which she had gone. She seemed to have taken all the light away with her. She did not come back.

You know, I thought I had dropped and dropped until I had now touched the ultimate bottom in misery. I did not realize, you see, that I had anything more to lose—except my life.

CHAPTER II.

TWO OUTCASTS.

VALUES change. Tip a man's life upside down, take from him everything he holds worth while, make him ashamed to meet the eyes of those who were once his friends; do all these, I say, and then let him go three or four days with an empty belly, and he becomes a fit subject for—for anything.

I had my back up against the wall, literally. I was leaning against the wall of a department store on Franklin

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Avenue, in Tampa, Florida, simply because it was easier to lean against something substantial than to try to stand up straight.

The cop at the corner had been giving me the eye for five minutes, and I had the spot picked out where I would clip him if he came over to put the hand on me for loitering. What, in God's name, can a man do but loiter if his shaking legs won't carry him away from where he happens to be standing at the time? I had been kicked around just about long enough. I wasn't going to take it any more, not even from a cop.

I had been a fool to have followed the Florida Air Tour over to Tampa. For weeks I had been wandering around trying to get a job. Not a flying job, of course, because the first thing they would have done would have been to ask me my name. I could have changed that, but without a license ticket I couldn't have gotten a job anyway. And I don't blame the proprietors of other businesses for not picking me out of the long line of unemployed. I had been a little shocked, every time I caught a glimpse of myself in a washroom mirror. Missing too many meals had, in the past few days, thinned my face down until my cheek bones looked almost like those of a Chinaman. New, deep wrinkles had etched themselves from the nose to the corners of my mouth. And a bleak hardness had come into my eyes that made them look more nearly black than gray. I looked what I was, a man who neither asked friendship nor had any to offer.

At Philadelphia and Baltimore I had tried to ship aboard out-going liners and freighters. I, who had once worn the gold braid of a Lieutenant, Junior Grade, in the United States Navy, who had been the fair-haired lad at Annapolis—eager to find a lousy mattress in some stinking forecastle! But even they didn't want me now. They were getting choosey, what with hundreds of applicants standing patiently in line. My slight limp counted against me. How could I tell them that I had collected that limp breaking the then-existing record for speed planes around a closed course? It wouldn't have meant anything to them or, if it had, it might have meant too much.

I tried to tell myself that flying stuff didn't interest me any longer, but whenever I saw a plane zipping overhead, my throat grew tight and I stood watching it, trying to guess who might be in that wind-swept cockpit until it had disappeared from my vision.

And when time came for the National Air Races at Miami, I assured myself that the reason for going south was to escape the hard winter. There might be jobs in Florida. Or so I let myself think. My last half-dollar bought me dinner the first night at Miami. But I saw the races, saw Elena careening perilously around the pylons, winning the woman's event by a good lap and a half. It was almost worth the trip. I saw Low-wing Hendrix, too, and if he had crashed, I could have danced on his grave with pleasure. Why be so sanctimonious about the dead? I wanted him dead, and that was all there was to it.

WHAT a nightmare it had been, standing on the outer edges of the crowd and watching others do what I had so often done myself? I dared not even go down on Flagler Street for fear somebody would see me who knew me, who might point a jeering finger at me and say, "There goes the louse who abandoned his passenger in a falling plane."

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It was there that I read, in a discarded newspaper, that Elena and—of all people—Low-wing Hendrix were going to fly from Tampa to San Lorenzo after the exhibition closed there. My fingers itched for his throat. Oh,

RED

he was a flyer, all right. There were few better. But if she got too clubby with him she'd get hurt. Love them and leave them; that had always been Low-wing's motto. Oh, well, she was asking for it. It was her business, not mine.

A dozen times I thought of smuggling aboard a P. and O. boat for Cuba—or any boat that left Miami—just to get away from the aching nostalgia, from the hagging wish to get into one of those sleek-winged planes and to go soaring up into the sky that seemed, now, to be my true element. But I didn't. I watched every event, and when the meet broke up and some of the gang flew across the Everglades for the Tampa show, I didn't have sense enough to quit. I thumbed my way after them. I don't even remember how many miles I walked, or what kind of cars gave me a lift. But I do remember that it was much farther by land than it had been by air. By the time I got into Tampa the flying was through. And so was I.

Now, standing with my back against the wall of the building, I was just letting time drag past. It occurred to me that a meal might be had at some relief agency, but it didn't seem worth while to bother. It was getting so my stomach didn't ache any more. It was just numb.

I saw the taxi slow up as it passed me. But I didn't pay any attention to it, either then, or when it slewed and stopped suddenly at the curb, twenty-odd yards down the block. A big man, with shoulders almost as broad as mine, popped out of the cab and came swiftly toward me. His face was bronzed bone-deep, and his eyes were very blue. Vaguely, but without much interest, I looked at him, thinking I had seen him somewhere during that other life of mine—the life in which I had been a flyer, and respected. But it did not matter now. Besides, my eyes weren't focussing very well.

"Buck!" the man said, coming to a stop directly in front of me. "Buck Benson!"

"Go away," I said, tiredly. "I don't know you, and I don't want to."

"For God's sake, Buck!" he said, in an awed voice. "When did you eat last?"

"Go away," I said, "before I pop you one."

I still didn't know him. I remember thinking dizzily that he looked something like me. No, not in size, for he wasn't more than five feet seven, while I stood six feet one. Not in general appearance, for his hair was flaming red beneath the battered felt hat that was perched over his right eye. It

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was something else. Now I had it. It was the expression on his tanned face. He was smiling now, but I got the general idea that he didn't smile often, that he hadn't smiled more than a few times in years. There was the same bleak, drawn look around his mouth, the same hard-bitten appearance of his narrowed eyes, that reminded me of the vision that confronted me every time I happened to look into a mirror.

"Buck!" he said, once again. "Of course you know me. I'm Red—Red Craig."

THAT cut through the fog in my brain. I hadn't seen him since the old days on the U.S.S. Chester, when he had outranked me by half a stripe and I had come as close to having a case of hero worship as a sensible egg can have. He had been everything, I thought, that a naval officer should have. Looks, physique, a to-hell-with-it attitude toward physical danger and the knack of making men do just a little better than they knew how. And then, just a year after I had left the Service, he had gotten into a jam. He had taken one or two drinks too many, one night in Colon. Something had happened and he had broken the jaw of Captain Strickland, the meanest officer in the entire Navy. Every junior officer and enlisted man in the Navy would have voted Red a medal for the job, but the Court Martial voted him out of the Service.

I had been flying a big transport between Rio and B.A. when it happened and I didn't hear of it for some weeks. I felt as if someone had died in my family. I sent a dozen cables trying to find out where he was, and if he wanted anything, but there was no answer. He had just disappeared. I knew why; he had come from four or five generations of Navy men and the disgrace had flipped him into a tail spin. When I returned to the States I tried to find out where he was, but nobody knew. One fellow had seen him in Havana, drunk at Sloppy Joe's. Another had heard he had been arrested for drunk and disorderly conduct in New Orleans. The most recent rumor was that he was running a rum-runner between Bimini and West Palm Beach. Red Craig, who might have been Chief of the Bureau of Navigation some day, a rummy!

And now here he was. He had been a long way since I had last seen him. But so had I. But so far as I was concerned, he was still Red Craig, no matter what he had ever done or ever would do. Once or twice in every normal man's life he finds a friend he'll go all the way with. That was the way I felt about Red.

Desperately I hoped that he had read about me in the papers, or had heard about my trouble, and that he was speaking to me in spite of it.

"How long," he demanded, "has it been since you have eaten?"

"I'm dieting," I said, trying to grin. "Doctor's orders." Then, because he had to know, sooner or later, "Red, have you heard about—have you heard anything about me?"

He smiled, with that wide, reckless smile that seemed to wash all the hard bitterness out of his face.

"Forget it, Buck," he said. "You didn't do it. You don't have to tell me. I know."

You wouldn't believe what that did to me. The first man in long months to look at me and tell me he knew I was all right. His smile twisted into a wry grin that I did not remember.

"Just a couple of outcasts, eh, Buck?" he said. "Well, what you need

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now is something to eat. Then we'll figure out what to do next."

And so it happened that I got into his cab and was introduced to the fat, squashy man who was sitting impatiently in the rear. His name, it appeared, was "Lard" Roope. As a matter of fact, one didn't call him "Lard" to his face. The story was that he had killed the only man who had so addressed him. But the name had stuck, and he knew it, and that was one of the things, perhaps, that made him the sort of man he was. There are, when you come to think about it, mighty few of us who have no vanity at all.

YBOR CITY is a part of Tampa, but it is a part of Cuba, too, and one of the cross-roads of the Antilles. Political storms in any of the Hot Countries are instantly felt in this town whose population is as Latin as that of Havana. Refugees from a dozen tempestuous republics plot happily around the marble-topped tables of the cafés which line East Broadway, and in the shady, shabby shacks near the docks and freight yards beyond the tracks. After every revolution in the Caribbean, new arrivals add to the groups of furtive whisperers who drink, smoke and talk from dusk to dawn. It is a place of dirt, stinks and of swift, explosive violence. Almost anything can happen in Ybor City and, in the course of any given year, most things do.

As if the silent, flatly saturnine presence of Lard Roope in the cab had dried up our well-springs of conversation, neither Red nor I spoke while the cab swooped across a bridge over a spiderweb of tracks, bumped along cobblestoned streets and rattled past row after row of identical one-story shacks, tied together in great bundles by single community verandas. Street lights were few. To our left were the docks; the gaunt, specter-like masts of sleeping vessels were like a frost-killed forest whose trees look silently upon squalor at their feet. A few windows were open in these furtive shacks; tinny pianos and blaring radios filled the air with Spanish tangos, Cuban rhumbas and American blues. Girls stood on the verandas, eying the cab speculatively. I was reminded of Panama City, and of Bordeaux, and of New Orleans at its worst.

Our cab squealed in protest as it pulled in at the curb, directly in front of a single house whose windows were like dark eyes, whose veranda leered like a toothless mouth and whose tawdry malignancy somehow reached out to touch us even before we dismounted from the cab.

The man Roope dismounted first. I glanced at Red in astonishment, but his hard-etched profile was set in stern lines of heedlessness. Obviously he had expected to stop here. He got out and I followed. By the time Roope had reached the top of the creaking wooden stairs the door had been opened for him by some invisible hand.

"*Arroz con pollo,*" Red said to someone I couldn't see at the end of a dark, ill-smelling hall. "Chicken with rice, a double order. And two bottles of rum, *pronto.*"

A big living room gave onto the hall. The light from its glaring overhead fixture was closely shuttered from the street.

Roope stood at the door and looked back at Red.

"Pedro," he called toward that dark end of the hall. "*One* bottle of rum will be enough."

I glanced quickly at Red. A dull

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flush appeared below his high, strong cheek bones, but he didn't say anything. He didn't even meet my eyes.

It was hot in the living room. Suddenly I felt faint and sick. I sat down, quickly.

"Steady, son," Red was saying, and the next thing I knew a tremendous draught of Cuban rum was searing its way down my throat. "There. You'll eat in a minute."

Apparently he turned to Lard Roope. I didn't see. My eyes were closed and it was too much trouble to open them.

"This guy, Roope," Red's hard voice was saying, "is a friend of mine."

"In our business," Roope's fat voice replied, "a man has no friends."

"I didn't remember I had," Red retorted sharply, "until I saw him. He's in a jam and—"

"Does he hit the bottle, too?" Roope asked, with a hint of contempt in his voice which cut through me like a white hot needle.

"He's in a jam," Red repeated, crisply, "but it wasn't his fault. He was a navy officer and a damn good one. If he wants it, I'm going to give him the mate's berth. Perez is no good. I don't trust him."

THE voices came in waves, but I didn't listen very carefully. I was sorrier, even, for Red than I was for myself. I was just an ordinary guy in trouble, but Red was—oh, hell, Red was just Red, the man every youngster in the Navy would have walked through fire and brimstone for! By now he should be a three-striper and be commanding a flotilla leader. Instead, he had to take things like that from such a man as Roope. I felt sick all over.

After a while he called me, and I ate. I ate three mammoth orders of chicken and rice, wolfed down a yard of hot Cuban bread and drank four rums. And all the time Roope and Red Craig were sitting over in the darkness, talking in rapid-fire Spanish that had a note of urgency in it. A Cuban girl waited on me, looking archly at me over the platters of saffron colored rice. She was trying to be seductive and it almost spoiled my food.

"I think," I said, pushing away the plate at last, "that I'm getting a little drunk."

"Listen, Buck," Red said, getting up and coming over to the table. "I have a job for you."

He picked up my drinking glass, tossed the water into an ornate fernery and filled it to the brim with rum. It was a drink that would have knocked over a bull elephant but Red tossed it down as if it had been but a thimbleful. Now I knew, and I felt pretty rotten.

"Do you want a job badly enough so you're not very particular about it?" Red asked me.

"Anything you okay is fine with me, old-timer," I said.

"I don't okay it. I want to make that clear. It's a lousy job. But it's a job."

That prodigious drink hadn't affected him at all. He took one more, and the bottle was empty. He looked across at Roope, then put the bottle down.

"I'll take the job," I told him.

"Don't decide too fast," Red cautioned me. "Wait until you hear what kind of a show it is."

"I've already decided," I said. "If you're in it, I am, too."

Red glanced around at the fat man. "You see?" he said. "I told you."

"Whatever he done," said Roope,

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unpleasantly, "must of been pretty raw to make him that anxious."

The liquor in me turned sour, instantly. I looked at the fat man. "Would you like," I said, politely, "a good, swift bust in the nose?"

The man Roope slipped his pudgy hand inside the lapel of his linen coat. He waited, watching me.

"Listen, Roope," Red said, savagely, "you are just asking for it. And let me tell you; this guy is hard, see? Which is one of the reasons I want him. And when he's polite, like that, trouble is right on the way. Remember, I warned you."

"Hard, is he?" Roope said, still eying me. "Well, I'm no pussywillow myself."

"Not when you've got a gun and he hasn't," Red said, tiredly. Then, looking at me: "Don't start anything, Buck. Roope's really yellow, you know. That's why he's so dangerous. A scared man is twice as dangerous as a brave one, any day."

WHEN I saw Roope sit there and take it, I knew Red was telling the truth. The man's piggy eyes, half lost in the pendulant folds of flesh, were glittering with malice, and his purse-like mouth was only a petulant crease below his absurdly small nose. One more thing I gathered; there was little love lost between the two. What form of skullduggery held them together I could not guess. But there was no use worrying. I'd find out in due course. Meanwhile it was fine to be full of good hot food and just a little jingled.

"Just don't rib me, Mr. Roope," I said, evenly. "I don't take too much, except from my friends."

"Got any friends?" snarled the fat man.

"He has," said Red, evenly. "I'm his friend. So what?"

Roope decided, apparently, not to risk a break. He glanced at his wrist watch. "Where's Garcia?" he asked, complainingly.

"He ought to be here now with the draft and the money for the payroll on the island."

"We're sunk," Red said, indifferently, "if he waits too long. First thing you know, a G man will come wandering out on the wharf."

A G man? I glanced quickly at Red. What was he doing that he should be afraid of government officers? His vivid blue eyes met mine in a long, searching stare. He was afraid, I guess, that I would ah-ah him. But I had nothing to say. The world had turned against us both. What did it expect of us—that we should meekly lie down in the sun and starve quietly to death?

There was a sound on the front porch. Roope's fat hand dived again into the opening of his coat. Red stiffened and I could see his lithe muscles swell beneath his sleeves. A small, nervous man hurried in, carrying a brief case.

"Here, *Señor* Roope," he said, in English heavily accented. "Your draft for the—" His quick dark eyes darted up to me. "—the machinery," he finished, cautiously.

"It's all right," Red said, succinctly. "My new first officer. Perez gets paid off tonight before we leave."

"And here," the Latin said, nervously, "is the cash for the payroll on the island." He tapped the brief-case with a twitching finger. "I suggest you make great haste. I was followed all day."

"Government men or Spaniards?" Roope asked quickly.

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"Some of—"

But he never finished his sentence. Red snapped out of his chair like a torpedo from a tube. In three long-legged strides he was at a door which led to some inner chamber of the house. He jerked the door inward. His arm shot out, yanked something into the room. It was a man, a Latin, whose swart face was contorted by fear and rage. A knife sliced a glittering arc through the air, but Red's hand went up so swiftly you could hardly follow it with your eyes. Just as I was reaching Red's side, I heard a sharp snap, like the breaking of a dry twig. The Spaniard screamed shrilly. The knife dropped. Red's prisoner grabbed his twisted right wrist with his left hand and his scream died away into a belly-deep sob.

"HERE," Red said, looking at Garcia, "is your spy."

"No, it isn't," Garcia said, nervously. "It's another. Maybe we better should postpone, eh?"

Roope was sitting like an oily Buddha there in the semi-darkness. The fleshy lids had lifted from his eyes now and he was staring at the man with the broken wrist. There was fright on Roope's face. It made his features look as if they were made of melting butter.

"Who hired you?" Red said to his prisoner. "Tell me, before I break your other arm."

The sobbing man looked up into Red's bleak face.

"Don't!" he screamed. "Don't touch me again, *caballero!*" He tried to jerk away from Red's grip. I grabbed the collar of his coat and held him. "All right," he moaned. "I tell you. Narvaez. He hire me."

I was unprepared for what happened then. Red was, too. I could tell.

Roope's pudgy face seemed to slide all together. Before we could move, he yanked out his gun and shot—just once. But that once was enough. The man with the broken arm folded over, slipped out of our hands and flopped to the floor. He kicked around once or twice and then stopped kicking.

Red looked at me. "I told you," he said. "Roope's yellow. That's why he does things like this."

I could hear feet tramping around upstairs. The sound of women's voices came to our ears. They were calling excitedly to one another in Spanish.

"Let's get out of this," Roope said, shakily. "We mustn't get arrested for murder."

"For two bits," Red said in a cold, hard voice, "I'd let you cool off beside him on the floor, here. You're getting too fast with your gun."

I looked down at the dead man. He had bled a lot. You wouldn't believe how much a dead man can bleed. It was curious, but I had seen a lot of men die in my time, yet never before had I seen a murder. Now I had not only seen one, but I was all mixed up in the thing.

ROOPE

"What the hell?" Roope snarled, turning toward the door.

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"Let's go," said Red, tiredly. We went out into the darkness.

CHAPTER III.

FILIBUSTERING.

GARCIA was whining and bellyaching as he drove us through dark streets, across railroad tracks and past gaunt brick buildings which, by the smell, were cigar factories.

"It is all right for you, who are leaving," he was saying, "but me I haf to stay, and Narvaez' men, they keel me and—"

"Shut up," I said, after I'd heard enough, "or I'll kill you myself."

Red and Lard Roope weren't saying anything in the back seat. A nice, happy little family! I was glad when Garcia turned hard right near a big dark warehouse and I could see a dock at the end. I had the feeling that if we kept on riding, and Garcia kept on whining, something disagreeable would happen. That's the way it is; you get started on violence somehow and it just leads to more and more.

A dark figure appeared from the shadows of the dockhouse. He stood right in the middle of the road and wasn't going to let us pass.

"All right, Glotz," Red yelled.

The figure disappeared. But by that time I wasn't looking at the watchman. I was too astonished at what I saw lying beside the dock. It was a destroyer. Except for the stacks, she was a dead ringer for one of the old 1,200-ton class. But she had only one stack instead of three. I blinked at her long, slim hull, trying to figure out exactly how drunk I was. If I had arrived at the stage where I was seeing things like this, I'd better stop drinking.

Red came up to me while Roope and Garcia were having a final talk beside the car.

"The old Nelson, Buck," he said. "Remember her?"

"What's she doing here? I thought she'd been decommissioned."

"Half a dozen of her class were sold for fruit boats. They took the armament off and the machinery. They put Diesels in them and depended upon speed, rather than refrigeration, to get the bananas to market in good condition. We bought this one from the Gomez Fruit Company. We've done a few things to her engines. She'll outrun anything except men-of-war."

Now, thinking back to those crowded hours, it seems odd that I had so little curiosity. I didn't ask what he and Roope needed of an ex-destroyer, nor where we were going, nor what the cargo might be. I was still groping blindly through a world of unreality, not daring to believe that I had at last found a friend, a friend who would not concede that I might have left Juan Jiminez to die, a friend who was as out of step with the world as I. I didn't want to know what was coming next. To drift, that was the way. Then you expected nothing, were never disappointed, never frightened of the future nor of the heartbreaks the future might bring.

I WON'T deny that I got a tremendous kick when my heels struck the remembered plating of the destroyer's deck. Almost I could forget everything that had passed, all the joys, and all the agonies, too, of those years since I had last walked the deck of a vessel. Automatically my eyes glanced about for the officer of the deck, but what they found were a dozen or more shabby men not in uniform who stared

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hard at me and looked as if they had never saluted in their lives.

"Get up to the bridge, Buck," Red said, crisply. "Make ready to cast off. I'm sending your predecessor ashore."

How easily my feet found the way forward past the engine house, up the ladder to the raised deck, up another to the bridge. Two men stood there, watching me as I climbed.

"Who the hell are you?" one of them said with an insolence that made my back hair prickle.

"I'm the first officer, replacing Perez," I snapped. "Name's Benson. Who are you?"

"Second officer," he said, a note of doubt toning down the belligerency of his voice. "This is a quartermaster—Murphy. My name—Maxwell."

"Have the engines turned over," I said. "Have the bo'son stand by the lines."

A queer tightness came into my throat. It was all so familiar, the glassed-in windscreen, the steel windbreak on the narrow bridge, the chart room with the soft light over the table. And it was good to put that note of authority into my voice again. The second officer hadn't moved. I swung to face him.

"Did you hear my orders?" I said, speaking hardly over a whisper.

Something in my face must have moved him—swiftly.

"All right—sir," he said, and went to the tube to call the engine room.

"Steering engine all right?" I asked the dark-faced man who stood silently by the wheel.

Quickly he spun the wheel and from below the familiar clanking of the steering engine responded.

"All right, stand by," I said, and went out on the shoreward end of the bridge to wait for Red to come up to the bridge. The throbbing of the engines beat against the soles of my feet. It was a different throbbing than the sweet purring of turbines, but it was power; that was all that counted.

I looked out at the darkened wharf and at the lights of the city of Tampa. In a little while we'd be shoving off. I hoped I'd never set foot on land again in all my life. I was born to the sea and the air. Every moment I spent on land was a long moment wasted. I—

Something was happening ashore. A pair of head-lights appeared, swung around until they flooded the road to the dock with their dazzling beams.

I had a hunch. I leaned over the after rail of the ladder just as Roope's panting figure labored up the ladder.

"Oh deck!" I called. "Let go the lines. All of them. Smartly, now!"

"Where's Red?" Roope wheezed.

I DIDN'T know where Red was. I wished I did. But that was between Red and me; Roope had no part in it. I leaped to the telegraph and swung the handle of the one marked "Port Engine." The answering jangle came sweetly to my ears. I glanced out of the window toward the wharf. I was just in time to see the dark silhouette of the watchman step out into the broad beams of the car lights. He held up his hand, then danced aside just in time. The car came on, its motor snarling authoritatively.

"Hard right on the wheel!" I called to the quartermaster.

"Where's Red?" Roope demanded. "Is he in his cabin? If he is, he's getting dr—"

"Shut up, before I pop you one!" I snarled.

The motor car drew up to the dockside with a screech of dragging tires. Five men tumbled out.

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My bow lines were snaking inboard. The breast and stern lines were still fast to their bollards. Even as I looked, the breast line drooped and slacked off into the inky water.

"We're the law!" a steely voice shouted. "Stop your engines and put over a gangway!"

The bow had swung out. We were pushing ahead against the restraining tug of the stern line.

"Full speed ahead, both engines!" I said in a low voice.

I heard Maxwell swing the levers, heard the answering bells from the engine room.

Nothing afloat leaps ahead as does a destroyer. Even with our Diesels instead of the power of destroyer turbines, we almost leaped out of the water. There was a sharp "ping" as the hawser broke. And another as we took up the slack and carried the breast line away like a length of seizing stuff.

A livid streak of blue-and-crimson flame licked out from the dock. A burst of machine gun bullets clanged metallically against the wheelhouse. But there was no time to worry about that. We were charging across the narrow, turgid waters of Ybor Channel at an angle. The whole Channel was not as wide as the Nelson was long. Instinctively the quartermaster spun the wheel to the right. Our knife-edged bow missed an out-jutting pier by scant inches. Roope whimpered softly. The staccato tac-tac of machine gun bullets clanged accompaniment somewhere below.

Red's big figure appeared beside me as I stood with my head stuck out the wheelhouse window.

"Thanks, Buck," he said, quietly. "I'll take over."

His head was four feet away but I could smell the acrid scent of liquor on his breath. Roope fluttered behind him like a fat buzzard. I stood still for a moment, palsied with indecision. Three hundred feet of steel destroyer, twelve hundred tons of her, gathering speed and forging swiftly down a channel that seemed hardly wider than the slim hull itself. Madness.

"Maxwell," came Red's quiet, controlled voice, "stand by the telegraph. We'll have to reverse the port engine when we swing around the bend into Sparkman Channel. Right a little. Steady."

Calm, invulnerable—and drunk, Red leaned his elbows on the vibrating sill, looking out into the night. He had found time to slip on an old Navy blouse, its service insignia missing. His white-topped hat was set at a salty angle on his bright red head. Put uniforms on the rest of us and take the taint of liquor out of the wheel house and we would have been back in the Navy during some taut moment in maneuvers.

"I'll take the wheel, quartermaster," I said.

IT was the least I could do right now. With relief the man surrendered the wheel. If Red gave the wrong order, I might be able to save the situation. But he did not give the wrong order. A quiet word now and then, that was all, and they were the right words at exactly the right time.

I had flown, thirty feet from the ground, at two hundred miles an hour, but never had I known a greater sensation of speed than now while I steered the Nelson down past those flashing beacons which were so close they leaped wildly as our black hull hissed by them.

"You're crazy, Red!" Roope suddenly screamed. "You're both drunk and crazy!"

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Red did not move as the fat man staggered up behind him. I reached out with one hand, took Roope by the collar of his coat and jerked. He went off balance, tottered backward on his heels and fetched up with a crash against the bulkhead behind me.

How we made the turn into the main channel at Davis Island I don't know. I saw the artificial wall of the island looming up at us. The channel to the left, leading down into Hillsboro Bay, was no wider than that down which we were now racing. I held my breath. My hands twitched on the wheel. It was time to turn. In an instant it would be too late. The alcohol had finally befuddled Red. I wouldn't wait another—

"Port engine, full speed astern," said Red, calmly. "Hard left, Buck."

I spun the wheel. Ages and ages of time seemed to drag past before the quivering ship felt it. She trembled from stem to fantail as the reversing propeller bit into the water. The bow began to swing.

"Steady as she goes," said Red.

The range light slowly slid into place ahead of us. The concrete retaining wall swung aside, took its position alongside, moving astern in an endless ribbon of white. A long hiss of pent-up breath came from my lips.

"Two-thirds speed forward, both engines," Red said from the window.

And now we were roaring down the main channel, sucking all the water in it behind us. Hooker Point on the left and Davis Island on the right were so close we could have spat ashore, it seemed, from the bridge. Then they fled astern. Now there was open water alongside, but I could actually see our bow waves break on dry sand, not thirty feet off our port quarter. One more heart-breaking turn as we entered Hillsboro Bay, then we straightened out for a clear run to the entrance of Tampa Bay.

"My God!" Roope squalled. "The man's crazy! Can't we slow down now?"

"St. Petersburg's right ahead of us, half-way down the bay," Red replied calmly, not taking his eyes from the flowing waters ahead. "There's a Coast Guard Base there. It'll take them a little while to break out the planes and picket boats after the G men telephone them from Tampa. Our only chance is to get past before they intercept us. Full speed ahead, Maxwell. Telephone the chief to give us every revolution he can."

"You're drunk!" Roope cried. "Slow down, I tell you!"

"Get off the bridge," Red said.

"I won't! I'm owner of this—"

I turned in the darkness and looked at him.

"Maxwell," I said, softly. "Take the wheel."

IN the darkness, broken only by the soft glow from the binnacle lamp, I could see Roope looking at me. Whatever he saw on my face must have scared him. He licked his lips, hesitated and vanished.

"Never mind, Maxwell," I said.

Lights flashed past us. The throbbing of the deck plates increased in tempo. I held her straight on the range lights at the end of the channel. My heart was beating faster than the engines. Off the starboard bow I could see crimson stain in the sky that marked St. Petersburg. It was like war maneuvers with the fleet, this tense racing along in the darkness. But the penalty for losing was no longer a low efficiency rating, but the cold steel bars of the penitentiary. Or, as I remem-

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bered the spy whom Roope had so needlessly killed, a seat in the electric chair. We careened around the next bend in the channel, missing the black beacon by fractions of an inch. I swallowed my heart.

"Two hundred and forty degrees, Buck," Red said cheerfully.

I straightened out on our new course. St. Petersburg, with its lights and its glowing canopy of sky, worked abreast of us, and astern. Maxwell, his breath coming and going so I could hear it whistling through his taut lips, was watching out of the starboard windows and wondering, as I was, when the Coast Guard would appear. I kept my eye on the compass, glancing up only to mark the range lights of the channel ahead.

"It's an even break," Red said, darting a quick glance toward the city. "I guess we've beaten them down. We'll take the Southwest Channel. Maybe we can slip past Egmont Key without being reported. Then we'll take a quick zig-zag northward. They'll be looking for us to head south."

Now I could see the double flashes of Egmont Light ahead. There wasn't a sound on the whole ship except the queer bumping throb of the Diesels, the hissing of the seas that fled past our plates and the chunk-chunk of the steering engines as I eased the spokes back and forth between my hands. The lighthouse drew closer, winking solemnly at us every six seconds. We turned to the left. Egmont Key slipped past us on our starboard side. Another couple of miles at racing speed, lifting, now, to the ground swells of the open Gulf of Mexico. Then,

"Three hundred and twenty degrees, Buck," Red said, turning away from the window. "Hold that for two hours and then set a course for Cape Antonio, Cuba. Quartermaster, relieve Mr. Benson at the wheel. Mr. Maxwell, take over."

My hands were trembling as the quartermaster took the wheel. I was drenched with sweat. Nothing ever looked half so good to me as that utter blackness which is the open sea at night.

RED stood aimlessly at the companionway. Then he wandered out onto the wing of the bridge. I followed him. He was standing there with his hands resting on the dodger, letting the wind play across his hard-bitten face. I moved up beside him. But I didn't say anything. The reaction was hitting him. I knew it without his telling me. I remembered other nights in the Caribbean, south of Guantanamo and east of the Canal, when he and I had stood the night watches together, both of us with the road to the future as clear and bright ahead of us as the straight line of Fifth Avenue. And now we were here, I an ex-pilot branded as a coward, he a broken officer, and a drunk. Both of us headed for hell under four bells and a jingle.

"You know, of course," he said in a queer, far-away voice, "that I'm drunk."

"Yes," I said, matter-of-factly. "But nobody in the world, drunk or sober, could have come down the channel like that but you, old-timer."

"I'm drunk a good bit of the time," he said, quite casually. He wasn't apologizing. He knew he didn't have to apologize to me. He was just telling me so I'd know how it was. "Liquor's a fine thing," he went on. "It keeps you anæsthetized so whatever you're doing doesn't bother you much. What a break for me that I found you!"

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"For me, too, Red," I said. "I was about foundered."

"Listen, I want to tell you before I forget. We're filibustering, you know."

"I thought so."

"We're loaded to the gunnels with arms, ammunition and machine guns. Below decks—" He suddenly remembered and walked to the wheelhouse door. "Maxwell, go below and tell our worthy passengers that they may come up on deck. Chase 'em below again if you hear an airplane motor." Then, coming back to me and continuing, "And we've got two hundred of the toughest fightingest men we could pick up in South Florida as passengers. Gunmen, strike-breakers, plug-uglies and varied and assorted cutthroats. Any one of them would carve his initials on your heart for a package of cigarettes if he happened to be out of them. Don't argue with them. Tell them and then reach for your gat. And if any one of them starts to work on you, or even shows signs of starting, shoot for the belly. Nobody'll miss them. There's a spare gun in the rack on the bulkhead. Keep it handy and don't be afraid to use it."

ELENA

"Fair enough," I said. "And now you've told me this much, tell me what it's all about."

"The usual thing," he said. "Another revolution on the Mosquito Coast. Lard Roope is a contractor of sorts. He sells arms, ammunition and men to send and receive what the ammunition delivers—bullets. He's contracted to deliver these two hundred men to the concentration island. We've made two trips before. This is the last one."

"What island?" I asked.

"Hell Island," he said.

I tried to remember the charts, but I had never heard of Hell Island.

"Oh, that isn't its real name," he said. "On the Coast and Geodetic surveys it's Santa Cruz Cay. Some wheeze, eh? Santa Cross Island! It would shame the devil himself, what goes on there! Remember how tough Bimini was in the lush days of rum-running? Well, at its toughest, Bimini would look like a Men's Bible Study Class alongside of Hell Island.

I WASN'T much impressed. I'm a peaceable egg, myself, just as long as people don't start pushing me around and tearing my clothes. Maybe I can't tell you just why I didn't take Red's words more seriously. I guess I thought he was low in his mind on account of being drunk again, and the reaction setting in. I should have known that if he, hard as he had become, thought the place bad, it would be something pretty special in the way of hellishness.

But I couldn't have known then, of course, that Red and I would have other responsibilities besides ourselves. I had forgotten, you see, two very important things that were to affect the entire course of the tragic events to

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follow. I had forgotten that Elena Jiminez and Low-wing Hendrix were starting their flight across the Caribbean in the morning. And I hadn't thought to ask Red the name of the country to which this Hell Island belonged.

"Want to take this watch, Red?" he asked in a voice that was unutterably weary. "I'm going to have a nightcap and turn in."

"Stay below as long as you want, big boy," I said. "I can call you, if you like, when we make landfall at Cape Antonio."

"You're a good guy," he said, thickly, and left me.

CHAPTER IV.

MID-OCEAN PICKUP.

IT was just after noon on the next day when we picked up Elena's SOS. According to the reports she had been making by radio ever since she had left McMullen Field, she had been having trouble with her feed line. At twelve-ten word came up from the wireless room that she was making a forced landing in the sea about eighty-five miles north-east of Cape Antonio, which is the extreme western tip of Cuba. I had just gone on watch again, relieving Maxwell. I dashed to the chart board and got busy. It was as I had guessed. She was less than thirty miles to the east of us.

There was a long, easy ground swell running. Nothing to bother a vessel, but just enough to trip the under-carriage of a plane and to spoil a pancake landing on the surface. I could see Elena, so small, so fragile-looking, buried in a litter of struts, wire and fabric, sinking slowly as the air leaked out of the shattered wing surfaces. And Low-wing Hendrix— But it was all right about him. He could sink as soon as he wanted to, and it was just fine with me.

I sent word down to Red. And even as I waited for him to come up, I gave orders to change the course. At the first wild clatter of the steering engine Red flew up the ladder. His face was as white as old paper and his eyes were terrible. He glanced ahead toward the empty horizon.

"What's wrong, Buck?" he snapped.

I showed him the wireless. He seemed to have trouble reading it.

"Thirty miles away, skipper," I said. "I'm heading for them now. We can't let a girl drown."

He steadied himself against the binnacle. He was not drunk any more, but he looked to be just a couple of short steps away from the purple elephants. He rubbed the back of his hand against his blood-shot eyes.

"Of course we can't, Buck," he said. "But what in hell will we do with them after we pick them up?" He squinted down at the flush deck. Forty or fifty of our assorted plug-ugyies were standing around and they were as villainous-looking a crowd as I had ever seen in my life. This ship is no place for a girl. You know that. But I agree with you. We'll have to go."

I knew that's what he would say, but I was glad to hear him say it, just the same. But I did not like the idea of any girl, even Elena, who had tried to stab me, aboard this crowded vessel. Already we had had one scrap when a couple of cut-throats had gotten drunk and had tried to take possession of the cabin which the first and second engineers shared in common. The steward had found them in there and they had thrown him out. Red, at that moment, had been on the bridge, so I

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handled it. For a minute or two it had been hard going, especially after one of them tried to go to work on me with a knife. Then I stopped cuffing them around and gave it to them both with the butt end of my gun. That took the play out of them. But I expected more incidents of the same kind before the voyage was over.

And the crew, while efficient, looked as if they had been selected for their willingness to obey orders while asking no questions—about anything. I had already discovered that Maxwell, the second officer, had been a rummy on the St. Miquelon-New York run. The chief engineer had been blacklisted because of his habit of getting drunk when the ship left the wharf and not becoming sober until she had berthed at the other end of her trip. Murphy, the best of the quartermasters, was a deserter from the Coast Guard Base at Miami. And so on, I imagined, through the entire crew. I had been around enough to realize what the presence of a pretty girl might do aboard this ship. But, on the other hand, she couldn't be left there to drown. I told Red this. He nodded, briefly, and had turned to check up on the course when Roope came bouncing up, his fat face rolling sweat.

"We have turned!" he panted. "Why?"

RED handed him the message. "We've gone to pick them up," he said. "That is, unless we hear that some other vessel is closer."

Roope's eyes popped. He waved the message at us. "The girl's name is Jiminez!" he cried. "I read it in the papers Sunday. Jiminez—of San Lorenzo. Fools, doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"Fools?" said Red, gently. "You wouldn't be speaking of us, would you?"

Roope's piggy eyes swivelled. Some of the blood ebbed from his ruddy cheeks. "No, no," he said, hastily. "Just a manner of speech. But this Jiminez girl. My God, she is Pedro Jiminez's daughter—daughter of the Minister of the Interior, of San Lorenzo!"

Red whistled soundlessly. "That tears it," he said to me. "This whole outfit, and the gang of roughnecks on Hell Island, are gathering to help overthrow the present government of San Lorenzo. And her old man is part of that government."

I had never paid much attention to the periodic revolutions in the Hot Countries. In late years they had become so frequent that the metropolitan papers carried news of them under the weather reports on the next to the last page—unless an American citizen was killed. So I didn't comprehend what significance all this might have. She was still a girl, wasn't she?

"If we take her aboard," Red said, "and she learns what we're doing, she—"

"She tells her father!" interrupted Roope, pantingly. "And the fat's in the fire! No, we do not go after her. She will float a long time. Let somebody else have the honor. Quartermaster, back on your course."

I stepped forward, but it was not necessary.

"Steady, Murphy," Red's calm voice said. "As she is." He turned to the fat man. "You forget yourself, Roope, and I can't think of anything worse for your health than forgetting that I'm captain of this vessel until you pay me off at the end of the voyage."

By this time I was around behind Roope. I thought he was going to

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dive for his gun. So I was all set to go to work on him. I was itching for the chance. There was something about him that made my flesh crawl. But I had no excuse to lay hands on him. With something very like a whimper, he spun around and trotted heavily down the ladder.

Red went to the telephone and rang the radio shack.

"Send me any messages you pick up about the plane," he commanded. "List all the vessels that are close to it."

He turned back to me. His lean, bronzed face was very grim.

"It's the worst break we could have had, short of being stopped by the Coast Guard," he said. "One woman—one decent woman, I mean, pitched into this mess will just raise hell. I hope some other ship is closer than we."

BUT it was we who picked her up. This northeastern gateway to the Yucatan Channel, usually so dotted with steamers, had no other vessel within helpful distance of the wrecked plane. The Cuba, Tampa-bound out of Havana, had turned from her course, but she could not reach the plane for at least five hours. A fruit boat on the New Orleans-Limon run was six hours to the northward. And those were the nearest of all the ships whose wireless inquiries filled the ether.

I saw it first, from the crows' nest. The big monoplane had sunk until her wing was awash. My heart leaped as my glasses picked up two figures standing on the crumpled wing. It leaped and then went cold and heavy again. A nameless foreboding swept over me as I saw Elena and Low-wing Hendrix standing there, waiting to be brought back into my life. Two links to a past I had hoped was behind me forever!

"Hey, you up there in the roost!" came the ribald voice of a roughneck on deck. "Is the broad all right?"

"Is she easy on the eyes?" another called.

Now my anxiety was nameless no longer. It was definite, exact. I swarmed down the ladder and pushed my way through the crowd of laughing men to the wireless shack. The operator looked up from his dials.

"Can't you find any other vessels that could pick the plane up within an hour or two?" I demanded.

"Ixnay," he said.

So that ended that. I hurried down to my cabin and slipped a packet of cartridges into my pocket. I examined my automatic to be sure it was in working order. Then back to the bridge, where Red was morosely conning the ship toward the floating wreckage.

"The entertainment committee on deck," I told him, "is already warming up. I smell trouble."

"Yes," he said, turning grim eyes toward the crowded rail below. "So do I. We have to cool some of them off before we make landfall. Do you know the man who's with the Jiminez girl?"

"He's the one," I said, "who testified that he saw me leave my passenger behind—to save my own skin."

Red looked at me. I didn't say anything, nor did he. It wasn't necessary. Outcasts both, we understood one another perfectly.

WE were alongside the wrecked plane. Red jockeyed the ex-destroyer as if she had been a canoe. Maxwell, the second officer, put over a Jacob's ladder amidships and helped Elena and Low-wing

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aboard. It was difficult to believe that Elena was not a schoolgirl, out on a day's sail. Dark little tendrils of her hair curled out from under her suède helmet and, girl-like, she had found time to add a wholly unnecessary touch of lipstick to her bright red lips. The sports dress beneath her leather flying jacket had somehow missed being soiled by the oil which must have spread over the wreck when she had pancaked into the sea.

Our mob of roughnecks and gunmen crowded around her as she scrambled up the short ladder and stepped on the deck. They nudged one another, eying her with unabashed enthusiasm. Someone in the rear of the crowd said in a high, falsetto voice, "Oh, baby!" and made loud kissing noises. Elena pretended not to hear.

Low-wing Hendrix, swarming up the ladder, turned quickly at the sound and stared angrily around. But the roughnecks returned his angry stare with sardonic grins. Low-wing shrugged and turned away.

I leaned over the rail of the bridge deck, watching silently. My right hand was in the side pocket of my coat, where my gun was. Red, standing beside me, said nothing, but his blue eyes were cloudy with trouble.

Maxwell, with three huskies, elbowed a way through the admiring crowd. Elena and Low-wing followed him toward the bridge. The fighting men stood aside with obvious reluctance. One or two of them made exaggerated bows to Elena as she passed. I wondered where Roope was. Sulking in his cabin, I guessed.

"Back on the course," Red commanded. "Standard cruising speed."

We got underway just as Elena's glossy dark head appeared at the top of the ladder. She saw me and stumbled. I reached out, grabbed her by the arm and steadied her against the roll of the vessel. She braced herself against the rail and took her arm away from my hand.

"Glad we could pick you up, Elena," I said, trying to keep my voice even. "Señorita Jiminez, this is Captain Craig."

She did not even look at Red. Her great dark eyes were still on me, and all the bright color ebbed from her clear olive cheeks. She turned, as if to go away, as if to descend quickly to the main deck. But Low-wing was just behind her, blocking the ladder, and behind him were the plug-uglies, looking up at her and murmuring ribaldries among themselves.

"I'm sorry no other ship rescued you, *señorita,*" Red said bluntly. "We are hardly equipped to take care of women passengers."

Elena took a long breath. "Yes," she said, for want of something better to say.

Now Low-wing had reached the bridge. His lips parted as he saw me and his dark eyes flickered. But he recovered himself in a moment.

"Fancy seeing you here, Buck!" he said. "Or wouldn't your name *be* Buck Benson aboard?"

"Steady, Buck!" Red said, crisply. Then, to Hendrix, "And your name is Low-life Hendrix, isn't it?"

My heart warmed again. It's good to have a real friend. In another second I'd have had my fingers digging into Low-wing's windpipe. Now I could relax, and smile.

"Low-*wing,*" Hendrix corrected. "Or George, to you."

"It doesn't matter," Red said, offhandedly. "As you can see, we're crowded aboard. Not a spare berth. *Señorita,* I'll fix a bunk for you in the

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chart room, here on the bridge deck. For several very good reasons, I suggest you don't leave this deck. Hendrix, the bosun's mate, will find you a place to throw a mattress somewhere below."

"But—but—" objected Elena, her face very white, "aren't you going to put me ashore?"

"Certainly," Red said, crisply. "Somewhere. I don't know, yet, just where. On our way back from the San Lorenzan coast, I'll try to put you aboard some inbound ship."

"And why," Low-wing put in, "should it be on your way *back* from the coast? We were heading for San Lorenzo and it will be quite convenient if you put us ashore there."

IT was just then I noticed something. Red was looking at Elena and there was a queer expression on his hard-bitten face. Some of the hardness had faded from his eyes. He looked almost as he had in the old Service days when he and I used to "drag" girls to Navy hops. He looked up and saw me staring at him. He glanced away a little uncomfortably, I thought.

"Because," he said to Low-wing, "it's more convenient to do it that way, see?"

"No," said Low-wing, insolently, "I don't. Is this a prison ship, or something?" Then, cutting his eyes at me, "It might well be, at that."

"Listen," I said, edging up to him, "I'm just itching for an excuse to tear the living hide right off you, inch by inch. And the way—"

"Steady, Buck!" Red commanded. "Mr. Low-life, if—"

"Hendrix," Low-wing interrupted, coldly.

"If you make one more crack to my first officer," Red went on, brusquely, "I'm going to let him take you, see?"

"Will you please send a wireless to somebody," Elena begged, "asking them to have a ship meet us and take us off this boat? And telling them that we are—are safe?"

"But are we?" Low-wing asked, sardonically.

"I wouldn't know," Red said. "I'll do what I can to protect Señorita Jiminez. So far as you're concerned, you'll have to take care of yourself. As for sending a wireless, I'll do this: I'll have the operator send out a broadcast saying that you've been picked up. But making contact with some other vessel is impossible."

"What do you—" Hendrix began, angrily. "A swell outfit, you've got here! A yellow pilot who let this girl's brother die—"

That would be about all of that. My left hand shot out and grabbed his necktie. I didn't want to do him the honor of hitting him with my fist, as you'd hit a decent enemy. I snapped him toward me and slapped him. The sound of the blow echoed against the bulkhead, drifted down to the crowded deck below. Not letting him get set, I slapped him again and again. At each pistol-like slap I left a clear imprint of my palm and fingers etched upon his mottled face. He tried to punch my guts loose, but I jostled him, not letting him brace himself for a damaging blow. Lie me to hell, would he? *Slap!* Hang around after Elena, would he? *Slap!* I didn't feel the punches that he dug into my mid-section. So wild was the anger that surged through me I wouldn't have felt it if he had knifed me. *Slap! Slap!*

Through a thick fog of anger I heard Elena's voice. "Don't!" she was crying. "Oh, don't, please!"

I could hear Red's voice, imperson-

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ally interested: "I never saw a man being slapped to death before!"

I COULD hear a rising murmur from the crowd below. But it was all far away, as in a nightmare. Low-wing, staggering back, brought his knee swiftly up to my stomach. The sharp, gagging intake of my breath brought returning sanity. I wheeled him around, still wrestling him off-balance, headed him toward the ladder which went down to the main deck. I shoved and kicked at the same time. I heard him hit the steel deck below, but I didn't bother to look down.

That, I know now, was a mistake. I shouldn't have been content with half-measures. I should have followed him down, then and there, and killed him. But I was new, still, to the matter of killing. I wanted to badly enough, but killing was something that was done by gangsters, by vengeful fools of lovers, and by soldiers. I was none of these. I was just a seaman who once, in some happier epoch, had been a pilot, riding the free wings of the wind and loving every instant of life.

Roope came panting up the ladder. His fat face was dripping oily sweat. He looked apoplectic. He labored up to the bridge and stood before me, trying to drag a gun out of his pocket.

"You lousy fool!" he panted. "You would start fighting, mutiny, bloodshed on my ship? I—I—"

Red stepped forward, but I was a little ahead of him. I placed my hand against Roope's fat arm, pushing it hard against his bulging chest so he couldn't haul the gun out.

"You'll what?" I snarled at him.

"That's enough, Buck," Red said, quietly. "Roope, you'd better pipe down before it's too late. I'm telling you."

The wild anger went out of Roope's half-hidden eyes, leaving a snaky glitter in their place. The muscles of his arm no longer tugged against my hand.

I obeyed Red and stepped back. That was my second serious mistake within a very few minutes. I should have killed Roope, too.

Sometimes, even now, I lie awake at night, remembering, and speculating upon how different things might have been had I killed both Low-wing and Lard Roope that bright afternoon on the Caribbean northwest of Cape Antonio. I find myself wondering what might have happened to Red Craig, whose eyes were so bitterly hard, and to me, who was lost in a world of uneasy values. Might we not have found contentment of a sort together, I wonder, keeping our minds well drugged with violence, seeking forgetfulness in the wild thrill of physical combat, until, finally, the law of averages caught up with us as, sooner or later, it must? I don't know. I wish I did.

"*Dios!*" Elena blazed, as I turned away from the ladder. "How I hate you!"

A rising murmur came from the crowd of plug-uglies below. It wasn't exactly a cheer. It was something different, something infinitely menacing, that I hadn't time or inclination to fit a name to.

Red's eyes narrowed at that sound, but there was something else on his mind. He glanced at Elena and then at me.

"I'd forgotten," he said slowly, "the name of the man who was killed in the—in your accident, Buck. It was Jiminez. Of course."

"Yeah," I said. "It was her brother."

Red squared his shoulders. He looked down at Elena.

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"Better go to your room, *señorita*. There may be trouble."

She just stood there. She measured him from his bright red head to his heels in a cold, contemptuous stare. He got as red as a spanked baby. Something about the way he looked at her made me good and sore.

"Go on to your room!" I snarled at Elena.

She turned on her heel and stalked into the chart-room. The steel door clanged.

Roope, standing by the engine room telegraph, spoke through twitching lips.

"Red, before we get back to Tampa, you'll be getting down on your knees and praying God to forgive you for bringing her aboard!"

And as it turned out, of course, the fat man didn't miss it by very far. But what else could we have done? We couldn't have left her floating on the sea, could we? Even if we had been able to foresee coming events, we'd still have rescued her, I think. We'd have shot Low-wing Hendrix as he stood there on the floating wreck. But we would still have rescued Elena. I'm sure of it.

CHAPTER V.

SALT BLOOD.

HELL ISLAND, from the sea, looked unbelievably beautiful. The coast of Central America was somewhere below the westerly horizon, and Hell Island stood clear and green and lovely out of a turquoise sea. It didn't seem possible that it could be as bad as Red had described it. I could see the old tourist hotel, once frequented by tourists from England and France who came to drink the mineral waters from its springs. Then it had been fashionable—a sort of Central American Bermuda, with wide-verandaed hotels, ornamented by jig-saw scrollwork and elaborate gardens. But an earthquake had shaken down many of the buildings, a couple of Caribbean hurricanes had screamed across the island in quick succession and the tourists had scurried away, never to return. Within two years Santa Cruz Cay had become just another island, brooding silently amid its faded vestiges of vanished opulence.

And then, fifty years later, another tide had set toward the island. Strange, bleak men landed there, men who spoke with the clipped accents of northern cities, who carried guns, who lived and died in violence. Supplies were landed there, boxes marked "Pianos" or "Agricultural Implements." The men looked at the straight line of the horizon, beyond which lay San Lorenzo, and swore great oaths and bragged, and fought one another to pass the time away. After a while women found their way there, as buzzards find their way to carrion. And Santa Cruz Cay became Hell Island.

Standing beside Red Craig at the wheel house window, I heaved a long sigh of relief as we rounded the shoulder of a hill and drifted slowly into the harbor. For two days and two nights neither of us had closed our eyes. And in all of this time we had never known at what minute the top would blow off everything.

Of course, Elena was at the bottom of it all. Not through any fault of her own, but because she was young, and dark, and beautiful, and very, very feminine. It was enough that she was alive, and aboard. Whenever she appeared on the bridge the men gathered on the flush deck below. They were idle, and bored, and they were—men.

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They cut their insolent eyes up at her and said things. Not loudly, but loudly enough. Except for keeping her out of sight as much as possible, there was nothing Red and I could do about it except to start rivers of blood sluicing into the scuppers. Fighting was their trade and they knew no obedience, no respect, except for authority backed up with guns whose triggers moved with exceeding ease.

Elena kept pretty much to herself. She spent most of her time in the chart-room, but now and then she would come into the wheelhouse, where she would sit on a high stool out of the way of the watch officers and gaze stonily toward the horizon, where San Lorenzo was hidden. Twice I had tried to talk to her, but her eyes met mine with a frozen contempt that made me want to crawl into some hole and die. I hadn't killed her brother, but he had, when you come to think of it, been left in my charge.

SHE did talk to Red, however. That is, when he finally stopped trying to defend me because he saw it wasn't any use. What they talked about I don't know. I stayed away from them. I didn't know quite why it made me ugly to see them together, but it did.

And Low-wing worried me. He and Roope had gotten so palsy-walsy that it would have turned your stomach. They were together all the time. Oh, I could guess the answer, all right. Roope wanted to deliver a flyer to the revolutionary interests and Low-wing would listen any time anyone spoke of money. Any money, from a nickel up. That wasn't what worried me. Low-wing could fly and fight for anyone he pleased, and the sooner he got his lousy neck broken the happier I'd be. I could have danced on his grave with delight. But what did worry me was the way that Roope, first, and then some of the men, began to look at me. It wasn't anything I could point my finger to and say "Do that again and I'll snap your back like a pretzel." It was just a sidelong glance that said as plainly as any words, "So you're the yellow so-and-so who bailed out and left that girl's brother to die?" That got me. But there was nothing I could do about it. I had bailed out, hadn't I? I couldn't go around button-holing one mug after another, telling him my troubles like a nickel-snatcher telling a hard-luck story for a glass of beer.

Low-wing didn't come on the bridge much—after we had swung southward into the Yucatan Channel. By that time Roope and a couple more had been giving me the eye and I was sore enough to want to taste his blood. He had come up that first morning after we had picked him up, and I had just been waiting for him. He and Elena were together and Red was studying at the chart board.

He said something to Elena, and I saw the look she gave me. I started in after him. Red happened to look up. He saw my face.

"Buck!" he called, sharply.

I didn't stop. Red dropped his dividers and stepped quickly in between us. "Are you ready to lick me, Buck?" he said, quietly.

"What should I lick you for?" I asked, trying to push him out of my way.

He threw his arms around me, holding me.

"Low-life," he said, over his shoulder, "get the hell off this bridge! Buck, be quiet before I take a swing at you!"

Low-wing looked up. He stared at me for a long moment. Then his eyes

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shifted. He got off the bridge in a hurry. Elena looked at me, too. She made me feel like a town bully who beats up the Sunday School lads. Why, I asked myself indignantly, should she act like that? I was taller than Low-wing, but he outweighed me by twenty pounds.

"Tell your boy friend," I snarled at her, "to keep out of my sight. He's a liar, and he knows it. Some day I'll have him groveling on the deck before you, begging me to let him tell you the truth and—"

"Buck!" Red snapped, in the Navy voice. "Cut it!"

I realized, then, that sooner or later I'd have to kill Low-wing. You see? The veneer of civilization was getting unstuck. Surprising, how easy the glue comes off and you find yourself getting back to essentials—kill or be killed, and to hell with everything else!

SO that's the way it had been for two days and two nights. So far as I knew Red hadn't had another drink since that time he got boiled coming out of Tampa Bay. That helped. But there were times when I thought he needed it badly. That was when he looked at Elena. She, I judged, reminded him of some of the things he had lost forever when he had been put on the beach by the Navy. At any rate, he watched her a lot when she came out of her room for air. He watched her so much that I began to have a funny feeling about it. And so this night, as the slim bow of the Nelson slid into a harbor of breath-taking loveliness, I was not altogether unprepared for what he asked me.

A queer time, you'll say, but I guess such things don't wait. If you have them on your mind, you have to get them off.

He was standing close beside me on the shoreward wing of the bridge. The haggard lines which had been on his tan face the morning after we had left Tampa had faded. He looked more like the gay young Navy officer I had known than he had since the beginning of the voyage. He glanced at me doubtfully, and he was obviously embarrassed. I didn't know quite what was coming, but I set myself, mentally, to take it.

"Listen, old-timer," he said, pretending to be much interested in the red-and-white bulk of the old hotel set half-way up the hill. "Mind if I ask you something?"

It was coming. Since when had he begun to ask if I "minded"?

"Shoot, Red," I said.

"Are you in love with Elena?"

My breath hung in my throat. Always, in my own mind, I had sidestepped that question. Even a couple of months ago when I had been Chief Pilot of the Apex Flying School and able to look the whole world in the eye I had shied away from it. Who was I, a big mug with nothing to my credit but a strong frame, handy fists and a knack with airplanes, to ask any girl to marry me? Especially Elena, who, I had heard, was born of a haughty and wealthy family and could have almost any man she set her mind on? And now—well, she had tried to stab me. Two days ago she had told me how she hated me. Suppose I were in love with her? What then?

I turned to look at Red. He was watching me.

"Hell, no!" I said. "I'm not in love with her."

He put his elbows on the dodger. "I wonder," he said, thoughtfully, "if you'd lie to me about a thing like that."

"Your bell is cracked," I said with

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a laugh that sounded strange to me. "I'm not in love with her. Never was. And, incidentally, she hates my guts. And that's that. So what?"

"Oh, nothing," he said, with elaborate carelessness. "I was just wondering."

And with that he made himself very busy getting ready to go alongside the wharf.

THE last of our plug-uglies had gone ashore. The ship seemed, and smelled, a lot cleaner after they had left. At that, our crew was of the same stamp, although Red had pretty well whipped them into line. But it was good not to have to worry about the passengers starting something that could not be finished except by gunfire.

Already there was revelry ashore. Two or three hundred men—and thirty or forty women—had come down to the iron pier to watch the new recruits go ashore. Before the last of them landed, three fights had started, but that was none of my business. They could all kill each other off if they wanted to. Finally the wharf was clear and the noise of fighting and drinking came from the shabby street—or what had once been a street—that fringed the harbor. It would be a wild night unless Roope's subordinates ashore had some way of controlling the men, and that I doubted. Else why had they permitted the women to gather?

Red and I were standing on the flying bridge, watching the men mill around down there, when we heard Elena's footsteps behind us. Her dark eyes went from Red's face to mine. Oh, I knew what she was doing, well enough. She was trying to figure out which one of us would be the easier to go to work on. She chose Red.

"Thank you for picking us up," she said in her rich, low voice. "I'm going ashore now."

"What," I asked her, "would you be doing ashore?"

"There are a few native fishermen on that island," she said. "I know, because I came here once with my father on an inspection trip. I'll get one of them to sail me to the mainland."

I gave her the laugh. "Going to be a great, big help to us, huh?" I sneered. "Tell teacher that the kids are planning to make whoopie."

"What he means," Red tried to explain, "is that you'll tell your father and, through him, the Narvaez government, that we have an expeditionary force—"

"I understand what he means," said Elena, evenly. "He has his faults, but he always manages to make himself perfectly clear."

I could stand almost anything, but not the look that was in her big eyes. "So far as I'm concerned," I went on, recklessly, "you can go ashore. You're asking for it. It'll be interesting to see if you can take it."

Just then Roope and Low-wing Hendrix climbed the ladder. My back hair lifted at the sight of the flyer, with his slick, brilliantined hair, his eyes that seemed to strip one of clothes with their sharply-focused glance, and his full, sensual lips that could say sweet things to a girl which would sound ridiculous from anyone more sincere than he.

"Roope," Red said, slowly, "Señorita Jiminez wants to go ashore."

Roope's fat face registered polite concern. "You would not be safe, my dear," he said with cloying regret.

I wondered if Red would tell his boss about the fisherman. It would indicate

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something I wanted very much to know.

"And why not?" Elena demanded sharply.

I realized, as never before, what American boarding schools did for a girl. She had gone to a fashionable Westchester school, I now remembered, and had garnered Yankee independence without, somehow, losing her Latin sense of the fitness of things. Spanish girls of good families do not get tight and go necking with any stray male who cuts in on them at a dance.

LOW-WING looked at her with a speculative stare. Then his eyes shifted to Roope.

"Why shouldn't she go ashore, Mr. Roope," he said, "if she wants to get some exercise? We're going. She could go with us."

Red's eyes darkened. As for me, I longed to batter that smooth, lecherous face into a bloody pulp. Red was looking steadily at a lump beneath the breast of Low-wing's jacket. There was a gun there, concealed in an armpit holster. Low-wing had not been carrying a gun when we had rescued him from the wreck. Something, I decided, was going on. Roope had treated him almost as a prisoner when he had first come aboard. Now they were going ashore together, all palsy-walsy. The scent of coming trouble grew strong in my nostrils.

"If you're going ashore, Low-wing," I said, nastily, "I'll fumigate your cabin while you're gone. It needs it."

A slow flush spread over Hendrix's saturnine face. His fingers began to work uneasily. I watched him carefully. Like Roope, who was a coward, Hendrix might fly off the handle when you least expected it.

"I meant to tell you, Red," said Roope. "I've hired Hendrix. I have a two-seater seaplane, and he's going to fly it for me."

"Who are you going to send with him to watch him for you?" I sneered.

I was getting pretty ugly. Things were getting too confused for a guy who likes them simple. Plots, cross-currents, deep-flowing hatreds, were getting me all mixed up. I hated to have to watch Red taking it on the chin, and to have Elena swung this way and that by influences that were too strong for her to cope with. It was as good a time as any, I figured, to have a general housecleaning.

"Do you mean to say," Elena demanded, incredulously, "that you're going to fly against my government?"

Hendrix jerked his furious eyes away from me. I could have sworn that he winked at Elena.

"Sure," he said. "Why not? The pay's good."

"We're going ashore, now," Roope said, nervously. "Mr. Hendrix and I. Red, I've changed my plans a little. We're not going back to the States for another load. That business with the G men spoiled everything. We'll shove off tomorrow night and land our recruits at San Lorenzo. I've sent a code message to General Lopez telling him where and when to expect them."

"Lopez?" Elena breathed, her cheeks dead white. "One of my father's best friends. A *caballero!* Isn't there anyone honest in all the world?"

"Sure, baby," Roope grinned with such oily smugness that I could have popped him. "I am. And so is Low-wing here. Don't worry." He reached out and tried to pat her hand. She jerked it away as if a bushmaster were striking at her. "We'll see you're

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taken care of." He grinned at Low-wing. "Won't we, eh?"

LOW-WING looked at her. There was something in his eyes— He saw me start for him. A gun leaped into his hand and aimed straight at my stomach. I paused, ready to duck under it. Another automatic dug into my side. It was Roope's.

"Stand still!" Roope said, shrilly.

I straightened up, took a long breath.

"Buck!" Red said.

"I heard all about it," Roope raved. "Low-wing told me how you left this girl's brother to die. Red, you aren't as choosy about your friends as—"

That tore it. Human nature can only stand so much. My left hand swung down, cracked across Roope's fat wrist and slammed his gun to the deck. And at the same instant I sidestepped, ducked down behind him and threw the full strength of my body at him, catapulting him into Low-wing. The flyer staggered. I was around from behind Roope, now, reaching for Low-wing. I didn't give a damn about Roope, but I wanted Low-wing. I grabbed his gun arm, swung it up. I sank the fingers of my right hand into his throat, digging for the windpipe. I knew this couldn't last long, but I wanted to take him with me when I went.

We fell to the deck. Low-wing was strong enough. His gun hand was hard to hold. The knuckles of his left hand came up and raked across my face. But I had his throat and that was all I cared about. As long as he lived he'd go on doing me dirt, telling people about my trouble. He wouldn't do it much longer now. His fist came up again. It smashed into my mouth. I tasted salt blood. But I didn't feel it.

Behind me I could hear Elena scream. I heard Red's voice, sharply commanding.

"Roope, put that gun down. Damn you, you kill him and—"

I was getting Low-wing now. His fist was losing its shocking force and his gun hand was easier to hold.

Red's voice came again. It sounded as if it were a million miles away. "Buck! Buck!" he was shouting.

But I didn't care. I had a job to do on this rat who had lied about me at the hearing.

I did not even feel the blow that exploded on the back of my head. There were bright flashes of yellow and blue and red. Slipping quietly away into darkness, it occurred to me, vaguely, that it was a shame to leave Red and Elena this way. Red needed a friend so badly. And Elena— I hoped Red believed me when I said I didn't love—

CHAPTER VI.

STAGE MONEY.

I STRUGGLED painfully up from the depths of a dark pit. And the funny part of it was that I was sorry. Some subconscious part of me was fully aware of the fact that I was returning to consciousness and was telling me what a shame it was that I would have to take up the thread of memory where it had been snapped apart.

There was so much I'd have to remember, and none of it was good.

Somebody was calling me, but I didn't want to listen, yet. If I listened, I'd have to wake up. And then I'd have to remember about Elena's brother, and about not ever flying again, and about the way people looked at me when they heard about my going

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overboard and letting young Jiminez die.

"Damn you!" I heard a voice saying frantically. "I didn't bail out, I tell you! I was trying to get him out and the wind tore me loose!"

"Sure, sure," another voice answered, soothingly. "You don't have to tell me anything about it. I knew it was something like that."

I relaxed. I knew the second voice. It was Red's. Unless you've had a real friend, a man friend who accepts whatever you do as being all right, who stands back of you no matter what kind of a louse you turn out to be, who may be out of your life for years, but always comes back—unless, I say, you've had this kind of a buddy, you could never know how much good it did me to hear his voice.

I sat up and steadied myself against the familiar steel skin of the ship while wave after wave of white-hot pain broke over my head. After a while they stopped and I found strength to turn my eyes.

Red was sitting beside my berth. He looked horribly tired. There were long, deep lines on his lean face. His fingers, as he lighted a cigarette, shook. His eyes were haggard, their pupils contracted to mere pin-points.

"Hi, kid," he said with a smile that was a heart-break to watch. "How you feeling?"

"Like hell," I groaned, and threw my legs over the side of my berth. "Who clipped me?"

"I did," he said, wearily. "If I hadn't, Roope would have blown your back hair through your teeth."

"Am I going through the rest of my life," I asked, "having my friends clip me when I'm in a schemozzle?"

"You can take it, Buck," he sighed. "You always could. Remember that time when the Marines, a couple of dozen of them—jumped us in Panama City?"

"Don't!" I begged. "I don't want to remember anything. I want to make myself believe I had no life at all up to the minute I boarded this ship in Ybor City."

I stood up and shook myself like a wet dog, trying to get myself together. I felt curiously light-headed. On the back of my head was a bump the size of a baseball. I reached into my locker and got out a bottle of rum the steward had given me the first night out. I didn't think. I yanked out the cork and took a glass from the washstand. Then I remembered, and I'd have given a hundred dollars if I hadn't pulled that cork and let the acrid fumes fill the room.

But it was done now. I didn't have the heart to put it away.

"Drink, big boy?" I said, and handed him the bottle.

HIS hand hesitated a moment, then reached eagerly. He poured the liquor out until it sloshed over the edge of the tumbler and down it went with never a gasp from him. Color came back into his face and his hands stopped shaking. I forgot the pain in my head as I watched him. A little of the definiteness was returning in his expression. That was it. Now I knew what he had lost—that is, the part of it that you could see. Reckless enough he had been, in the old Navy days, but there had been a definite sureness to him. He knew where he was going, and he was headed straight toward it, and he was perfectly willing to carry you along with him as he went. And now he didn't know where he was going. He was lost, groping his way through a dark world that was lighted

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only by the hot fumes of alcohol. He saw me staring at him.

"Life's a mess, isn't it, old-timer?" he said, tiredly, as he poured himself another drink.

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him not to drink it, not to get started on anything it would take a long time to finish. But, after all, what difference did it make? If he could find forgetfulness that way, more power to him. I wished devoutly that liquor could make me forget. It didn't. It reminded me of things, made everything worse.

"What time is it, and where is everybody?" I asked.

"Seven o'clock, or thereabouts." He shifted uneasily on his chair. "They've all gone ashore," he said.

"Who has?"

"Well, Roope had to take the payroll to the men we brought down last trip. And he was going to show that Hendrix bunion the plane. And—and Elena went with them."

That was hard to take. It seemed impossible, now, that once she had thought me a grand guy. I'd tell her to fly, or to stay on the ground, and there had never been any argument. And now she had gone ashore with Low-wing and Roope. I had thought I was beyond feeling things, but I wasn't.

"Is it safe for her ashore?" I snapped.

"No. Not safe at all. Even with us taking her around it might not be safe. And with those two—"

His voice trailed away, unhappily. He stood up and took another drink. He patted the side pocket of his coat, which bulged.

"Feel like a little exercise?" he asked in a crisp voice that was almost like his own. "Pack your gun; let's be going. I was just waiting for you to wake up."

"Fair enough," I said, pulling myself together. "The air will do me good. Let's go."

REVELRY under a hot white moon. The sound of crashing bottles, of drunken laughter, of men's voices raised in high dispute. In the distance a gun barked, but nobody cared. Tomorrow night men would die fighting for some politician in the name of liberty that was no liberty at all, so if a few died twenty-four hours too soon, what did it matter?

In grim silence Red and I swung along the grass-grown path that had once been a fashionable street. A few houses, damaged less than their neighbors by the countless hurricanes that had swept over this island, were lighted. Some were barracks in which men played cards, drank and argued. From others came the sound of tiny phonographs grinding out American jazz. Still others had been turned into saloons. Hard-eyed, incurious men passed us; most of them were drunk.

A heavy hand fell on Red's shoulder. It was one of the plug-uglies from the boat. His mouth was slackly friendly and his eyes jerked with the drink that was in him.

"Hi, capt'n," he said thickly. "Ol' Fats got your baby doll, huh? Besser—better do something about it before all hell pops tonight. Phony money ish pretty raw, if you ashk me."

Red, who had been about to turn away, swung back quickly.

"What do you mean, phony money?" he demanded.

But the drunk had lurched away and was reeling into the door of a *cantina* near by. Red hesitated, looking

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thoughtfully into the steaming, crowded room. Then he shrugged and moved on up the noisy street.

"I wonder," he muttered, "if—"

"If what?" I prompted him.

"Oh, nothing. Where do you suppose Roope and Elena are? At the hotel, I suppose."

There were no street lamps, just the light of the moon and the yellow fans of lights from the kerosene lamps within the *cantinas*. Figures flitted back and forth as unreal shadows. Nothing here seemed real. It was a macabre dance of death; frantically these hired fighting men were playing as best they knew how, playing as violently as they lived, and as violently as some of them would die when they landed on the precipitous shores of San Lorenzo. But it wasn't real, not even when we saw a man stagger out of a house, jerking something that gleamed darkly out of his ribs and falling heavily into the weed-grown gutter. It wasn't real, either, that Elena should be somewhere on this island. A growing sense of impending calamity bothered me. I didn't particularly mind a fight. It had something to do with Elena, that feeling of gathering disaster.

We turned off that disintegrated street and climbed an ancient road which had once known the crunch of carriage wheels, the laughter of cultured voices. Now it was silent except for the bawdy turmoil behind us. The hotel was ahead of us, a long, rambling structure of the mid-Victorian era, with double verandas embellished with intricate scrollwork and iron lace. A few windows on the lower floors showed yellow lights; the hundreds of rooms above were dark and unoccupied. We mounted the long, squeaking porch from the street side, not bothering to walk along the curved shell paths which led to the cast-iron fountain and the main entrance.

I found myself out of breath and realized that both Red and I had been walking faster than we had known. Had he, too, felt that nameless sense of foreboding? Heaven knows, I'm no clairvoyant, but like most flyers, I've learned to have profound respect for a hunch. I slipped my hand in my coat pocket to be sure my gun wasn't tangled down there.

The first of the long French windows was peaceable enough. I tiptoed ahead of Red and peered in through the Venetian blinds. A sallow-faced Latin was seated at an ornate table upon which was a small, compact radio set. He did not hear the sound of my footsteps; he was wearing earphones and listening to something that was coming through the air.

"Portable short wave set," Red said in a whisper. Why, I asked myself, was he whispering? He was as much a part of this concentration as Roope himself. He was as free to come and go as any man on Hell Island. My right hand surrounded the comforting butt of my gun. Red, as well as I, had a hunch. "They keep in touch with the revolutionary *junta* on the mainland," Red added.

IN the next three windows the jalousies were set at such an angle that we could not see within. Then we were at the big front door, which gave into a great, high-ceilinged rotunda that might have been the epitome of magnificence in the vanished splendor of its roof. Now it was an eerie place of lights and shadows. The dozen kerosene lamps bit small yellow holes in the darkness, accentuated the tawdry giltwork of the balconies of the sev-

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eral floors and pointed out, infallibly, what time and tempest will do through the slow passing of the years to the most ambitious works of man.

I entered, astonished to find myself walking on tiptoes. There was no need. A moldy, roach-eaten carpet cushioned out footfalls. But I still walked on tiptoes.

Rococo furniture, most of it broken, was still in place. A huge crystal chandelier had dripped its pendants to the floor, where they had been crushed by heedless heels, and lay like diamond dust tramped into the carpet. But where was Elena?

"In that parlor to the right," Red said, biting off his words and spitting them at me. "That's the office."

So he was feeling the tension, too? We swung to the right and entered a bedizened parlor, whose flowered wall-paper was peeling off in great, scabrous sheets, whose plastered ceiling had fallen in spots and whose air of complete decay was obvious.

There sat Roope, Low-wing—and Elena. A third man was standing beside the desk at which Roope was sitting. He was a Latin who wore a makeshift uniform and two dragging gun belts.

They looked up as we entered. Something of what we felt must have showed on our faces. Roope reached out and carefully moved a big automatic which lay on the desk. It made a scratchy sound as he pulled it directly in front of him. He looked as if he had been caught robbing a collection plate. The fat folds of his face were pretty and sweat was dripping greasily from his several chins. But his eyes were as coldly venomous as those of a snake. They darted appraisingly from Red to me and back again. Low-wing shifted uncomfortably in his chair. I knew that expression on his swart face. He had looked like that when he had testified against me in the trial. If trouble started, I would get him first. The Spaniard whom I took to be in charge of the concentration camp appeared merely annoyed. His bushy brows were drawn far down over his hot black eyes and he kept his hands very close to his guns. Elena, sitting on the edge of a gilt-and-tapestry chair, was pale. Her eyes looked twice their usual size and her vivid red lips were pilled into a small, straight line.

"Am I interrupting a conference?" Red asked, very politely.

MY heart sank at his politeness. When he got like that, I remembered, he was very drunk. He didn't look it. He was standing there before them, tall and straight and solid, a substantial figure in a room filled with static uneasiness. He was smiling gently, but little muscles were twitching beneath the bronze of his cheeks and the pupils of his eyes were no larger than pin pricks. I sighed to myself. There would be trouble very soon now.

Roope's eyes slid across the faces of Low-wing and the big Spaniard. There was a faint lifting of his eyebrows as if he were asking them a wordless question. Then, with an elaborate show of being candid:

"This doesn't really affect you and your operation of the Nelson, Red," he said, suavely, "but since you're here, I'll tell you. Those spies of President Narvaez, in Tampa, must have given our show away. All of it. A San Lorenzan plane flew over the island this afternoon from the mainland. It dropped this message. It's in Spanish, so I'll read it to—"

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"Let the *señorita* translate it," suggested Red, still in that discouragingly polite voice.

Roope's glittering eyes narrowed. But he said nothing. He passed the note to Elena, who was watching me. I slid my eyes away from Low-wing.

"I'll read it in English," she said. "'To the filibuster, Roope. If you will load your gutter-sweepings aboard the Nelson and take them to either Tampa or New Orleans, and there discharge them, you may draw upon the Federal Bank of San Lorenzo for the sum of $50,000 gold, American, and said draft will be honored, provided that you attach an affidavit to the draft that you will undertake no more filibustering expeditions against the Republic of San Lorenzo. If, by noon tomorrow, Santa Cruz Cay is not freed of the presence of your men, this offer is withdrawn and we will bomb the island forthwith. M. Narvaez, President.'"

Silence, thick and suffocating, spread through that shabby room. Red smiled beatifically. "You collected from the revolutionaries for landing this mob on the mainland of San Lorenzo, didn't you, Roope?"

"Y—yes," the fat one said, hesitatingly.

"Well," Red went on, rocking gently on the balls of his feet, "we can't stand a bombing raid, that's sure. The only thing to do is to notify General Garcia, by code message, that we'll have to land our men twenty-four hours early. We can crowd them aboard tonight and be off in two hours. We'll get to the mainland before dawn if we give her the juice."

"Impossible," said Roope, spreading out his hands in a gesture of finality. "We're through. And—" Now he squinted full up at Red, studying him with a speculating stare as if appraising him for his power to object—"and since it is impossible, we may as well make fifty grand extra."

"Playing both ends against the middle, eh?" purred Red.

ELENA spoke up. There was a faint note of contempt in her contralto voice, but at whom her contempt was directed I couldn't guess.

"If you attempt to land in San Lorenzo," she said, "you will all be slaughtered. I know it. Why not take the money?"

"Exactly," beamed Roope.

I was getting fed up. "What Red is trying to tell you, Elena," I said, "is that he isn't a lousy double-crosser."

"Wait a minute, Buck," Red said, smoothly. And to Elena, "I don't blame you, *señorita.* Your sympathies are naturally with the government. But we've undertaken a job. We've been paid for it. And we'll do our best to deliver the goods." He turned to Low-wing. "And what's your idea, Low-life?" he asked, politely.

"Hendrix, to you," Low-wing said, narrowing his eyes. "My idea? Nobody ever went broke taking profits."

"Mr. Hendrix is becoming part of my staff," Roope said. "He'll have charge of all airplane activities and—"

"God help any pilots you hire," I snarled. "I—"

"And he'll have his share of the bribe money, I suppose," Red cut in, quickly.

Roope did not answer right away. He was still staring at Red. Now, suddenly he heaved a gusty sigh of relief.

"You're drunk, Red," he said, and a little of the hostility died from his

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voice. He reached into his drawer and pulled out a bottle. "Have another then go back to the ship and sleep."

To my astonishment Red's face turned a bright crimson. He glanced at Elena, and suddenly I was sorrier for him than I had ever been for anybody in my whole life. I knew, now, what I had been suspecting for some time. He was in love with her. And now he was being nailed to the cross. He steadied himself and the smile came back to his face.

"Thank you, Roope," he said. "I'm drunk enough to—"

But he did not finish his sentence. The door was flung open and three plug-uglies stalked in. They were carrying guns and looked as if they wanted to use them without delay.

"You fat old rat!" one of them yelled when they were only half-way across the floor. "You'd pay us off in stage money, would you? Why, you cheap nickel-snatcher, you dig up regular money for us, right now, or we'll lynch the whole lot of you down in the plaza, see?"

Red stared at Roope. I watched Red. There was no sound in the room except for the footsteps of the three intruders.

"Stage—s t a g e money?" Roope wheezed. "What do you mean?"

And still Red did not take his eyes from Roope's flabby face. You would have thought he and Roope were alone in that static-filled room.

"You know damned well what we mean!" snarled the plug-ugly. "We—"

"So!" Red said, and something in his quiet voice cut through the gunman's raving. "Cross and double-cross, eh? Garcia, the revolutionary agent in Tampa, is an honest man. You didn't get counterfeit money from him."

"Cut out the gas, big boy!" snapped the stranger. "Get us the jack or we'll start pulling you to pieces! Thought you'd land us in San Lorenzo before we got wise, huh? Well, lemme tell you. Word is passing around the *cantinas*. In another five minutes they'll be wanting to drink your blood. So shell out, fat boy—and *let that gun alone!*"

ROOPE'S hand jerked away from his automatic as if it had burned him. His face was a dreadful sight to see. It looked like a mask that had begun to melt. His eyes twitched and jerked in their sockets and a thread of saliva oozed from the left corner of his mouth.

"Listen, you men," Red said, crisply. "Give me five minutes to get some information, will you? Then come back for your answer."

But the hired soldiers were ugly. They looked Red up and down. They looked at me.

"Oh, yeah? You mugs are all alike to us. A bunch of second-story workers. A Navy guy, heaved outa the service for getting canned alla time. A yellow pilot who jumps outa a airplane and leaves his passengers behint him. A—"

I turned to Low-wing. His face was white. He avoided my eyes. "Your tongue, Low-wing," I said to him, "is going to be the death of you."

"I didn't—" he began, but Red's voice interrupted. "If you mugs just want to fight," he snapped, "that'll be quite all right. If you want your money, you'd better scram and give me five minutes to find out some facts."

But now the leader of the three was gazing appreciatively at Elena, who had huddled back in her chair. She was scared, but her eyes were gallantly

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challenging. She returned the man's stare, look for look.

"Well," the man said, licking his lips, "I guess we got nothing to lose, waiting five minutes. You'll keep that long, baby."

My nerves were twitching and jerking. I was balanced on the balls of my feet and my right hand was finding its way toward the gun in my pocket. Red's fingers surrounded my wrist and bored down so I couldn't get the gun out.

"Wait a minute, Buck," he said. "All right, you men, beat it. Come back any time after five minutes. I'll tell you how you stand then."

"You won't have to," the leader said, dragging his ardent eyes away from Elena. "It'll be cash on the barrel head or else."

He winked broadly at Elena, turned and left the room, followed by his partners.

CHAPTER VII.

CONFESSION.

RED spun on his heel. He glared down at Roope. "Where's the real money?" he snarled.

Roope's hands went out, helplessly. "Honest, Red," he whined, "that's the money Garcia gave me to pay off with."

"You're a liar," Red said, contemptuously, "and you know it. Garcia's an honest man. You substituted counterfeit money so you could keep the good money and pay off the men with phony stuff. Where's the real money?"

Low-wing rose and pretended to yawn. "It's a nice island," he said, "but I've seen enough of it. Let's get back to the Nelson, Roope. Coming, Elena?"

Elena looked at me. Then away. "No," she said.

"Get away from me!" Roope squalled. I wheeled. Red, his fingers working, was advancing toward the desk. I began to work around behind the fat man. But the big Spanish officer yanked out his guns and covered us. His forefinger was white on the trigger. No chance for me to get to him before he could pull the trigger. I waited, not moving.

"All right," Roope snarled, "you're in this, too, so you may as well know what you're up against. I did switch the money! The good money is back in Tampa. I left it in that house, and it's in the safety deposit vault now. I—I was going to split it up."

"Liar!" Red spat at him.

"And I'm going to split it up as soon as we get back," Roope said, sweat running down his face like teardrops. His earnestness was pitiful, so anxious was he to convince Red of his excellent intentions. "So for God's sake, let's get back to the Nelson and shove off."

"And do what with all the men?" sneered Red.

"Leave them here!" cried Roope in sudden panic.

"Good God, don't you know what kind of men they are? They—"

"I know," Red said, wearily. "I'll take that drink now. I want to think."

Eagerly Roope passed him the bottle. Not looking at Elena, he poured himself a full glass and drank. Then he turned his eyes to me.

"Nice mess I got you into, Buck."

"No, worse than I was in already," I said, managing to grin.

"No good to discuss ethics now," he said, talking to me as if the others weren't in the room. "The facts are that if we don't produce the money they'll mob us. And—" He turned

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to face Elena, whose eyes were big and round and whose cheeks were as white as death. "And it won't be so sweet for you, *señorita.*"

"It's about time we were moving along," Low-wing said, impatiently. "Roope, is that plane equipped to fly?"

For a brief instant Roope's piggy eyes brightened. Then hope died out of them.

"No, the engine is not yet ready to run."

"All right," Red said, crisply. "What we'll do is this—if we have time. We'll go back to the Nelson. We'll post a guard at the gangway. Anyone who wants to go back to the States will get his money, provided he'll leave his arms on the wharf. And I, personally, will see to it that they do get their money."

"Sure, sure," purred Roope, but his gaze slid up to the face of the big Spik in a meaningful look that had no honesty to it. "Let's go, quick."

But in the very next instant, we knew we were too late. From the driveway outside came the murmur of an angry mob and the shuffling of many booted feet.

"Roope," snapped Red, "get Elena out the back way. I'll talk to the men."

Elena rose. "Thanks," she said, coldly. "But I'll stay with you."

"Elena, I—" Low-wing protested.

"Are you coming with us?" she asked him. "Or with that—that jellyfish?"

IT was too late to argue. Red ran toward the door. And I, of course, was right behind him. No telling what kind of a jam he'd get himself into. We skidded around through the big rotunda and emerged in the cool sweet air of the porch outside.

The driveway seemed full of men. Two or three hundred, perhaps, and all ugly. They booed at us as Red and I appeared on the veranda. I knew, suddenly, that it was no use to talk to them. They wanted blood worse than they wanted money right now.

Red held up his hand. "Attention, men!" he shouted in his Navy voice. The leaders halted at the foot of the steps. Those behind pushed and shoved, yelling catcalls. Red stood where he was, tall and erect, his bright crimson hair catching the full light of the moon. "Men, I'll get you your money. It's not here on the island, but I'll—"

That wasn't a good start. The shoving and yelling began again.

"Come on back, Red," I said. "They won't listen."

He tried to speak again, but the shouting increased. Elena, I discovered, was with us, looking more than ever like a schoolgirl. She was standing just behind me, and her small, white hand was on my sleeve. She shouldn't have come out.

"Get the doll!" somebody yelled. Four or five took it up. And all the while Red was trying to calm them.

Finally it was I who put an end to it. The glitter of something metallic caught my eye. A man standing just behind the front row was carefully aiming a revolver at Red. He was drunk. His face, behind the barrel, was contorted with murderous frenzy. The man in front of him kept moving, spoiling the gunman's aim. But in a minute he'd get set. My own heart almost stopped beating. But I was in time. I got my automatic out of my pocket and shot the man full in the face.

And then, of course, the trouble started.

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The thing was, you see, that a man's head won't stop a .45 bullet. The slug tore the gunman's face up, went through and hit the bird in back of him. The gunman didn't say a word—that is, that anyone could understand. But the man behind him squalled bloody murder. It was like setting fire to a train of gunpowder. They came up those steps like a tidal wave of cursing, shrieking humanity.

"You damned fool, you—" Red began.

He meant me. He hadn't seen the mug with the gun. But that was all right. Even Red knew it was time to run. I whirled Elena around and shoved her toward the door. Red was trying to get between me and the mob. I gave him a push that caught him off balance. Another that sent him spinning inside. I was in right after them. I threw the doors together. They were good doors, meant to hold out the screaming winds of the hurricanes. Oh, I knew the windows were wide open, but every split-second counted. I pulled down the bars and beat it.

"That does it," Red said. "There'll be no talking to them now."

"You couldn't talk to them if you were dead, could you?" I said savagely.

WE raced through the long corridors, passing scores of doors, passing dining room service pantries, as we tried to catch up with Roope, Low-wing and the Spaniard. Like it or not, we were all in the same box now. Time enough to settle with them later. And we would do exactly that, if we lived. Red had Elena's hand and was pulling her along. I wanted to take her other hand, but it would have seemed silly. One was plenty.

There was a back stairway leading off the pantry. We got there just in time to see Roope's fat carcass toiling up the stairs. Low-wing and the Spaniard were ahead of him. He heard us and turned frantically, brandishing a gun at us and almost shooting before he saw who we were.

"They've surrounded the whole place!" he cried. "No way to get out. We've got machine guns up here. We'll get them and—"

The rest of his words were lost as he turned around and began to labor upstairs again. Red shrugged.

"Bad thing to go up there," he murmured. "Start up and I'll have a look."

I didn't want him to get out of my sight, but I couldn't leave Elena, either. Already I could hear the drumming of feet on the coridor behind us. I shoved Elena up the first few stairs and tried to figure what to do. But by the time I had decided to go after Red, he was back. His eyes told me what I wanted to know.

"They're there!" he said, breathlessly. "Upstairs with you. It's the only thing."

So up we went. I was just behind Elena, protecting her slim, straight young figure from shots in case they got to the stairs before we turned the bend. We just made it. Shots rattled against the plaster at the turn just as we galloped up the second half of the flight.

The others were entering a deluxe suite exactly opposite. We bolted in after them. Roope wanted to slam the door. Red wouldn't let him. Boxes of arms and ammunition lined the walls of that room—the parlor—and of the two rooms adjoining. Red and Low-wing and the Spik began to rip the covers off the boxes.

"Watch the door, Buck," Red

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panted. "Don't let them come up stairs."

"Get around the corner, here, Elena," I said.

"Give me a gun, too," she said, simply. "I can shoot."

"Swell gal," I grinned. It was the first pleasant thing she had said to me since my trouble.

Roope was running around like a banshee. He was waving his gun until I thought he'd kill somebody by accident. I finally tripped him and he fell with a crash that shook the floor.

Two men came bounding up the back stairs. I hated to shoot. After all they were just bums like myself who had ceased to care how they made a living. But it was a case of kill or be killed.

"Get back!" I yelled.

BUT it was no use. I had to do it. I gave it to the first one—twice. An astonished expression crossed his face and he opened his mouth for a yell that never came. He pitched backward down the stairs, carrying his companion with him. That was good. I didn't have to shoot the other one. I hadn't quite become used to the idea of killing these birds. They were all right, except they had lost their moorings somewhere. But, of course, I couldn't let them get Elena. Or Red, either. I hadn't found a friend a few days ago just to lose him.

Things settled down for a minute. Roope had picked himself up and was peeking through the Venetian blinds toward the darkness below. The other three were cleaning cosmoline off the guns. They had unpacked five sub-caliber machine guns and plenty of ammunition. Well, that would keep us alive for a little while, anyway.

Red glanced up. He was more like his old self than I had seen yet. He grinned boyishly.

"Some fun, eh, kid?"

"Yeah," I snapped at him. "Where do we go from here?"

His dancing eyes fell on Elena and sobered instantly. He straightened up and walked over to her. He put his hand on her shoulder and looked down into her vivid young face.

"It's a rotten deal for you, my dear," he said, quietly. "And listen, I want to ask you something. If we should—"

I walked away from them. I couldn't stand there and listen to him telling her that he loved her. And that's what he was doing. I could see it in his face. I went to the window and looked out into the darkness through the slats of the Venetian blinds. The thing danced in front of my eyes and splinters flickered my face as a burst of bullets crashed through it. Lumps of plaster fell out of the ceiling. Through sheer ugliness I stepped back and fired a full clip down through the broken slats.

Roope screamed. I swung around just in time to see the arm and side of a man appear around the corner of the door. He had come silently down the hall from the main stairway. A gun exploded in his hand. Red whirled. I saw his right elbow jerk twice, heard his automatic bark twice. The room reeled with noise. The man outside the door disappeared, leaving the echo of a yell behind him.

"Look!" Roope bleated, pointing a shuddering finger toward the wall. "Just look, will you?"

Our big Spaniard was on his knees at the wall. His back was turned toward us. He was trying to climb the wall like a fly. He would reach up, try to dig his fingers into the plaster

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and thus lift himself to his feet. It was horrible beyond words, that grim, desperate effort to rise. And all the while his heart's blood was gushing out of him, making a black, viscous rivulet across the floor.

Elena glanced once at him, then put her hands over her eyes. I lifted my gun. I wanted to finish him off, wanted to end that hopeless effort to rise to feet that must already be growing cold. But it wasn't necessary. He toppled over, thrashed about for a heart-breaking instant and then died quietly.

"Go in the other room, Elena," I said. "Not the corner one. The middle one. Sit in the corner, away from the windows, with your back against the wall."

ASHEN-FACED, with her lips as white as her skin, she obeyed. Good kid. She didn't say a word. No reproaches, no lamentations—nothing. She just went. I patted her shoulder as she went by. She didn't draw away, and that made me feel good. No telling when—if ever—I'd see her again. It was nice to know that she didn't wince when I touched her.

Little enough, God knows, to ask of her, that she permit me to touch her shoulder, but you can't imagine how it satisfied me in that momentary interlude between volleys of flying death.

Low-wing and Roope were now dragging bureaus and beds to the door. They were good for that, anyway. Red pulled a mattress off the bed and made a barrier of it. I swung a new machine gun from the floor, fed a clip into it, cocked it, and joined Red behind that barrier. No man could come up the stairs, now. And it would take a lot of them, charging around the corner of the door, to live through what we were prepared to give them.

They were firing from outside. The ceiling was a mess. Plaster was coming down like chunks of stone from an erupting volcano.

"Well, kid," Red said to me, "I guess this tears our clothes."

"What do we lose?" I asked him.

His eyes darted to the door of the middle chamber. He didn't answer. So he did have something to lose, eh? But I didn't. That proved it. Well, I'd try to help him keep what he had. Me, I was ready to check out any time. The chances were a million to one against our living through the next half hour, and that was all right with me. If we should live, and he marry Elena, I would lose my buddy as surely as if he were killed. A trio never works out. So all I'd have left would be a long road of aimless, lonely wandering ahead, wishing to have things as they were, hating the world and everyone in it, until finally my time ran out.

Queer, but there were no more attacks from the hall. Plenty of firing outside, but nothing from within.

"Stay back!" Red ordered, when I would have gone out into the hall to see what was the matter. "It must be a trap. They've got us. Why don't they finish us off?"

I stuck my head out and got a good look down the hall before he reached out and hurled me back.

"A couple of men down by the grand staircase," I said. "And they are looking down the stairs. I'm going out and give them the works."

"You take one step out and I'll pop you one myself!" he raged.

I looked around. Roope was standing behind us, a machine gun in his hands, his eyes fixed hypnotically on the doorway. Where was Low-wing?

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"Yell," I said to Red, "if you want me."

I stalked into the middle chamber. Low-wing was in there. He had an automatic in his hand. He was talking to Elena.

"I tell you he did, Elena," he was saying. "I saw him myself. I was flying right over him when he bailed out and pulled the release ring."

THREE quiet steps and I was behind him. He saw Elena's eyes widen. He started convulsively and turned. My face wasn't twenty inches from his. "Tell the young lady you lie, Low-wing," I said.

I knew he'd swing the gun up, so I was ready. All the bile that had been poisoning me for months churned up in me. I wasn't hot with rage. I was cold, deadly cold.

"Drop that gun and tell her the truth, or I'll kill you, so help me God!" I said, icily.

He didn't believe me. The gun leaped up in his hand. But I had him. I grabbed the gun arm, twisted it until he screamed. The gun dropped out of his hand. I kicked it across the room. I shifted my hand to his throat. He tried to bend away. The footboard of the old-fashioned iron bed caught him in the small of the back. He bent backward, unable to get away. I grinned into his contorted face.

"Tell me when you want to talk," I said.

I pushed him back still farther, pinning his legs with my body so he couldn't flip backward onto the bed. I could feel his stomach muscles strain to the breaking point. The veins on his face looked like purple worms under the skin.

"Buck!" Elena cried. "Oh, don't. You're breaking his back! Don't."

Outside there was a terrific burst of firing. I hardly heard it.

"That's just what I'm going to do—break his back," I said, grimly, "unless he tells the truth."

I wanted to give a final push. He'd sent me to hell, hadn't he? His hands were fanning my head and shoulders. He might as well have been hitting me with a feather. I set myself to give him that final inch. But Elena was on her feet. She was beside me, tugging and pulling at him, trying to straighten him up.

"Give him one chance, Buck!" she implored.

Reluctantly I gave him back an inch of life. I relaxed my death-grip on his throat.

"Ready to talk?" I snarled. "Go ahead and say no. I'm just itching to hear your spine snap!"

He nodded his head. I pulled him to his feet. He stood there swaying. The purple went out of his face, leaving it as white as the coverlet.

"I lied, Elena," he sobbed. "He did his best to get Juan out of that cockpit. I watched him. The wind picked him up and threw him up past the tail surfaces. He didn't pull the release ring until then. I've hated him for years and years. I wanted to—"

But that was as far as his confession got.

"Buck! Buck!" Red's voice called. "Come here! The whole damned place is on fire!"

CHAPTER VIII.

RUNNING AMUCK.

BEYOND a certain point, the human mind becomes drugged with violence. Added catastrophe makes little impression. You have to

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consider one thing at a time. And right then the most important thing in the world to me was the fact that Low-wing had cleared me of cowardice—before the most concerned witness of all—Elena! She was staring at him with loathing on her small, lovely face. And he—don't thing he enjoyed having the truth forced out of him!

He was flexing his aching back, and his eyes were those of a cornered weasel. They hated me with an all-consuming hatred that was awful in its blazing intensity.

"Do you believe, now," I asked Elena, "that I was yellow and left your brother to save myself?"

But she did not have time to answer. Roope came galloping into the room. His fat round face was scarlet and he was frantic with fear.

"We're trapped!" he squalled. "They've set fire to the hotel! Both stairs are burning!"

I blinked at him. It was a moment or two before I even understood what he was saying. A great billow of acrid smoke rolled in through the door. Then I understood.

"Red!" I exclaimed. "Where's Red?"

Roope's mouth opened, but he didn't say anything. I dashed through the door. Smoke was pouring into the other room. I could see the indistinct outlines of the barrier, but Red was not there. I groped my way around the room, looking for him. A body was lying on the floor, face up toward the ceiling. My heart froze. But it wasn't Red. It was the Spaniard. I had forgotten him.

I hurdled the barrier at the door and plunged into the smoke of the corridor.

"Red! Red!" I yelled. "Where are you?"

Flames were roaring at the foot of the back stairs below the geyser of smoke that vomited up the well. Down the hallway toward the balconies of the rotunda was a blazing inferno. Flames were licking up the old, weathered stairs and floors, racing up toward the glassed-in cap with unbelievable speed. But where was Red?

For the first time in my life I knew what real fear was. I went stampeding down the hall, plowing through smoke that tore at my eyes, my throat, and burned its way down to the very bottom fiber of my lungs.

"Red!" I yelled again.

I should never have gone into that room where Elena and Low-wing were. I shouldn't have allowed Red out of my sight. He was drunk. I had known it then, and I should have taken care of him. He had called for me to come to him, but I had been too busy with my own troubles to heed him. He and I had travelled a long way separately. There was still a long and troubled trail ahead of us that we must travel together. He and I against the world! And now where was he?

I groped my way as far down that smoke-drenched corridor as the well of the rotunda, where the elaborate grand staircase came up from the lobby. It was an inferno of flame that scorched at my eyebrows and struck against my face. Red couldn't have come here. The heat drove me back.

HALF-WAY back to our suite, the smoke cleared for an instant. In the ruddy glow from the fire I saw Elena. She was staggering along the corridor, feeling her way on by running her hand along the wall. What was she doing out here? For an ecstatic instant I thought she had come to find me, even as I had to come to find my buddy.

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But then I saw something else. Red came reeling out of one of the doors that lined the corridor. And in the next moment the two pink-stained figures had blended into one. Red's great arms had encircled Elena's slim young figure and, as the smoke closed in around them, I saw him bend over to kiss her.

I tried not to think about what I had seen. After all, what did it matter? None of us would ever get out of this hell-trap, anyway. Let him have his last kiss, if he wanted it. But if he had known how I craved to put even a finger tip on her shoulder.

I bumped into them. "Am I intruding?" I snarled.

They broke. "Buck!" Red said, choking in the smoke. "Come on. That room there has a fire-escape."

"All right," I said, "go on. I'll get the others."

I didn't want to get the others. In fact, I hoped they had been shot by the crowd below while I had been gone. But if they were alive, they should have their chance.

"Hurry!" Red gasped. "We'll wait in that room."

I ran into the suite. Roope, his fat body wedged into the corner, was standing well out of range of the guns below. His machine gun was loose in his flaccid hands. He was in the last extremity of fear. Low-wing was crouching on the floor, firing down at the yelling mob. Even through the ever-growing roar of the fire I could hear them yelling down there, and it was not a pretty thing to hear. Their voices had a high-pitched frequency that cut into my heart like a knife. They wanted to watch us die.

"Come on, Low-wing!" I yelled. "Red's found a fire-escape."

He turned away. He rose to his feet. And when his eyes met mine I knew that nothing that had happened, or was going to happen, had dulled the keen cutting edge of his hatred. The glare in his eyes was fanatical. For a second or two I thought he was going to swing his gun on me then and there. But he didn't. He dropped his gun to the carry and came along. Roope shambled after him, looking as if his knees would refuse to support his body more than a step or two farther.

"Aren't you glad," I coughed, "that you slipped these birds phony money?"

He cursed me until his voice cracked in the smoke. But he followed close behind me as I led the way through the whirling darkness.

FIRE had raced along the hall. It had almost reached the door of the room where the fire-escape was. Well, we could jump it, I supposed, but the hotel was old-fashioned and high-ceilinged in the tropic manner. We'd have no legs left at the end of the jump. And we'd need our legs to fight through the cut-throats who wanted to watch us die. I hid my face in my sleeve and darted through the smoke to the door. I bolted into the room. The others were right behind me. Against the pinkish-black of the window I could see Red and Elena, standing silhouetted there as they looked out. We slammed the door behind us. The roaring of the fire in the hall wasn't so loud now.

"It's too late," Red said, steadily. He pointed down toward the ground. "They've brought a gang around to this side. They weren't there a few minutes ago."

I could see them quite plainly. Their bodies were painted scarlet by the reflection of the fire. Their faces were

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bright crimson. They were all looking up at the windows. They were laughing and nudging one another. A typical lynching mob. A queer sensation to think that we were the ones who were being lynched. Unreal, not happening to us in real life at all. It wouldn't be real, until our flesh felt the smashing impact of a bullet or the searing touch of the flames which were already at work upon the outer panel of our door.

"If I step out there," Red said, "and tell them we'll surrender if they'll keep Elena safe, maybe—"

"No!" Roope shrieked. "They'll tear us to bits!"

His heavy body plunged to the window, butting us aside. His machine gun darted up. It streamed a thin ribbon of flame down at that leering crowd below. But he wasn't fast enough getting back. Even through the roaring of the fire I heard the dull thud-thud as their answering bullets slammed into him. He pitched forward and lay sprawled, half in and half out of the window. Elena screamed. Roope's ponderous legs drummed against the floor, then became quiet. It amused the crowd below to keep on firing up at their grotesque target. Bullets kept on hitting him and his body jerked with every impact. It took Red and me, together, to pull him inside.

"That gathered the crowd!" Red said, bitterly.

It had. Men were racing from each end of the blazing building, dashing around the corners, attracted by the sound of the shots. A steady stream of bullets was now angling up from below, chipping an ever-growing hole in the ceiling. The room was getting hot. I could feel it on the bottom of my feet. The tendrils of smoke were curling in through the door jamb. The panel was radiating heat like an open grate. Even as I looked at it the door began to warp. From somewhere not far away there was a rumbling crash. The entire room shook. Everything outside, distant houses, palm trees and the implacable circle of waiting men, all took on a brighter hue of crimson. Something in the blazing hotel, a roof or floor, had fallen.

A cool, slim hand slipped into mine. It was Elena's. I looked at her. She was just standing there, staring mutely down at Roope's lifeless mountain of flesh. What she was thinking I could not tell. I didn't want to know. She might even be thinking about Red. It was enough that she stood close to me, taking comfort from the touch of my fingers. It was surprising, how much better I felt about everything when her hand was in mine. Even in that moment of chaotic pandemonium I felt better, knowing that she did not hate me any more. I would have hated to have her go out still thinking I had deserted her falling brother.

THERE was another crash. Closer, this time. Sweat was running down my chin, trickling down my collar. It was hot there in that room. I shifted from one foot to another on the hot floor.

"If we've got to get it," Red said, grimly, "let's get it fighting. Oke?"

"Oke," I said with a feeling of relief.

It was better to go that way than just to be burned like rats in a trap. Red fed another clip into his machine gun and stood up. He looked uncertainly at Elena.

"I can't let you stay here to be burned, my dear," he said, huskily.

Low-wing said nothing. He was

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standing farthest away from the window. He was in the rear corner. His face, illuminated by the ruddy light from outside, was like a death mask. His teeth were bared and his eyes were rolling wildly.

"I'll go down with you," Elena said, squeezing my hand just once before she slipped it out of mine. "Give me a revolver."

I gave her mine. I would take Roope's machine gun. Low-wing could take what he pleased. It was no worry of mine. It was so hot I could hardly breathe. Fire was now worming its way along the door jamb. In a minute the whole place would go up.

"We'll start shooting as soon as we step up on the fire escape," Red said, evenly. "There's a bare chance we might make it."

"If we could hold out just a little while longer," Elena began, trying to pitch her voice above the roaring of the flames in the next room, "there's a—"

"Let's go!" Red said, standing up.

"Wait!" I yelled, suddenly.

I had heard something they hadn't heard, a low, familiar buzzing that sent my pulses to racing, my heart to pounding with new hope.

"That's it!" Elena screamed. "The plane from home! I bribed your radio operator to send a message to my father that—"

The rest of her words were blotted out by the high-pitched snarling of not one, but three, airplane motors and by the thundering of the fire which was now booming and crackling just outside the door. I grabbed her hand again, then dropped it to join Red at the window.

He was already pouring a burst of bullets into the massed men below. I swept up Roope's machine gun, aimed it and pulled the trigger. The snarling of the airplane engines increased in volume to a stupendous snarl, cutting through the all-pervading thunder of the fire. We heard the stammer of machine guns from the sky, saw men stumble and fall. A thin shriek from above ended in a leaping fountain of flame which spouted from an opening hole in the ground exactly where the crowd was thickest. Bombs! The gunmen had stopped shooting at us. They were scattering like paper dolls in a hurricane.

"Come on!" Red yelled. "Let's get out, quick! Elena! Here."

He grabbed her, swung her out to the fire escape, started her downward and paused to level his gun at something he saw below.

AND it was then that it happened. Something, some inner sense jangled a warning. I was in the act of getting up and turned to glance at Roope. He was outlined blackly against a door which was just bursting into flames.

His face was contorted with frenzied rage and he was aiming his gun directly at my head.

I dropped. The gun went off. I thought I heard Red grunt. He was right behind me. No time to pull the trigger of my machine gun. I just threw it at Roope. I went after the gun like a sprinter from a crouching start. My body slammed into him. He staggered. His back banged hard into the panel of the blazing door. He screamed and pushed frantically away. I tripped. He came down on top of me, hammering against me with his gun. The butt just missed my temple. It raked down across the side of my head. I jabbed up at his eyes with my out-thrust fingers. He ducked to save

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his sight. I twisted, fast, grabbed his gun and spun it out of his hand. It fell somewhere.

The door crashed to the floor. It lay right beside us, blazing, and all the fire in the world billowed in through the open doorway. Low-wing screamed again as a livid tongue of fire licked toward him. He surged away. Then I was on top of him. The heat was terrible. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't even see him, although I was sitting astride his body like a drunken jockey. The whole room was a furnace and we were two demons in hell fighting it out to the death. Shoot at me and hit my best friend, would he? His fist crashed into my mouth. His elbow came up and jammed against my throat, almost throwing me off. My fists came down like blows from a hammer into his face.

Something happened and I was on the floor. He was up. He kicked me again and again. I grabbed his leg and yanked with all the strength that was in me. He toppled, lost his balance and fell backward. Not toward the window, but toward the furnace that was the hall. The flames closed in around him. And at the same instant the floor of the hall sagged. It was a bright scarlet-and-yellow shoot-the-chute, leading slantingly down to the deepest pits of hell. And I saw him go coasting down this runway, and I was glad. Glad, I tell you! Hadn't he been the direct cause of all the real trouble I'd ever had, with his lying tongue, his jealousy, his natural bent for intrigue? Of course I was glad!

My clothes were smoldering. My skin was shrivelling. I was drunk from the heat and from the blows of Low-wing's fists and boots. I groped my way blindly toward the window. Even the iron rail of the fire-escape was hot. The whole side of the building was a raging cauldron of fire. I'll never remember how I got down to the ground.

But I remember, too clearly, what happened when I got down there. Elena and Red were standing just beyond the heat-scorched area. Elena was holding Red's machine gun and he had one hand on her slender young shoulder. That hand of his seemed to weigh a lot. She sagged visibly under its pressure. The planes were roaring around like crazed hawks and there wasn't a gunman to be seen anywhere.

SOME time later Elena saw that the gunmen from the Nelson were given a chance for their lives. After all, we had brought them to Hell Island; it wasn't entirely their fault. They had gotten a raw deal from Roope and they were men of violence. I don't blame them, now, for running amuck. So Elena arranged with the San Lorenzan officers to let them go aboard the Nelson and to shove off for some unnamed port in the States, where, I understand, they presently arrived.

One San Lorenzan plane rushed Elena and me to the mainland while the others saw to the departure of the remains of the filibustering expedition. So Hell Island is Hell Island no more. The government has cleaned it up and now it's Santa Cruz Cay again.

Oh, yes. The business of my transport license and my fight with the Pilots' Association is all fixed up. Elena's testimony, sworn to before the American consul at Puerto Lucia, did the trick.

THE END

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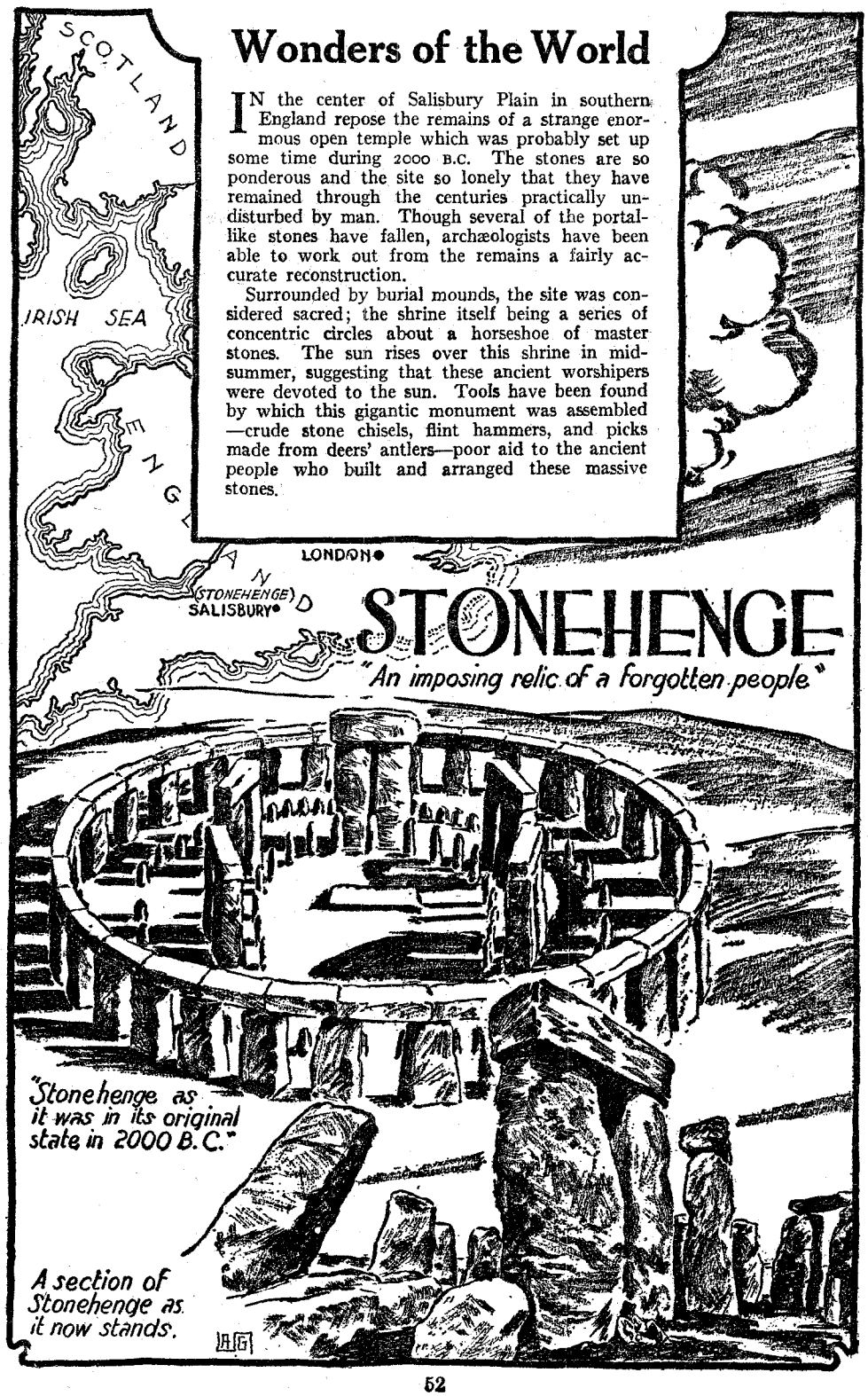
Wonders of the World

IN the center of Salisbury Plain in southern England repose the remains of a strange enormous open temple which was probably set up some time during 2000 B.C. The stones are so ponderous and the site so lonely that they have remained through the centuries practically undisturbed by man. Though several of the portal-like stones have fallen, archæologists have been able to work out from the remains a fairly accurate reconstruction.

Surrounded by burial mounds, the site was considered sacred; the shrine itself being a series of concentric circles about a horseshoe of master stones. The sun rises over this shrine in midsummer, suggesting that these ancient worshipers were devoted to the sun. Tools have been found by which this gigantic monument was assembled —crude stone chisels, flint hammers, and picks made from deers' antlers—poor aid to the ancient people who built and arranged these massive stones.



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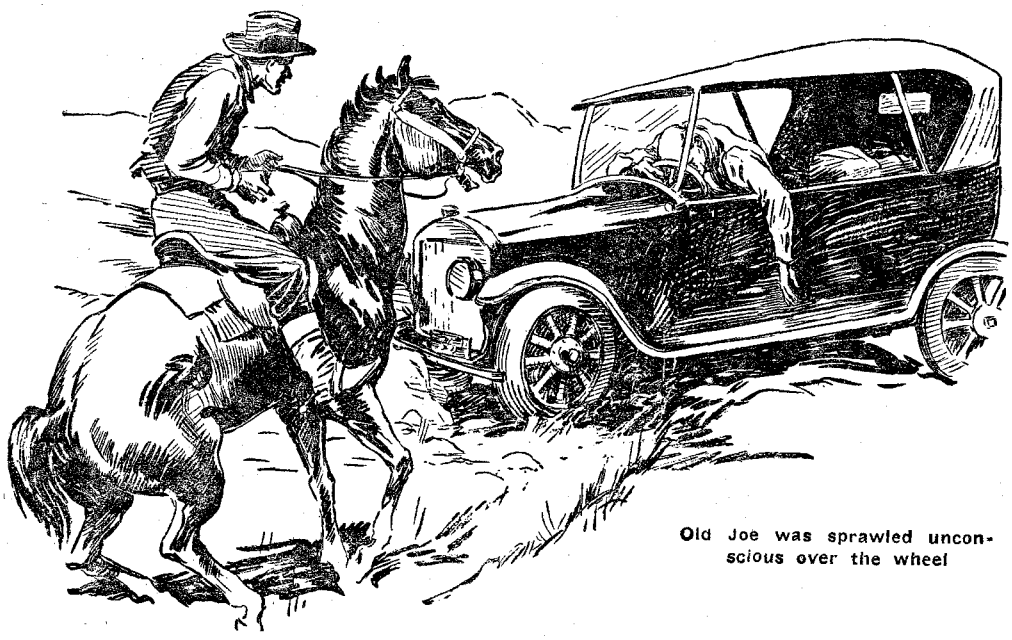

Old Joe was sprawled unconscious over the wheel

Amateur Devises

By WILLIAM FREEMAN HOUGH

There was no honor among these thieves—but they, too, learned it is the best policy

TOM REED, on the way to Gila Junction to see Linda and get his mail, found old Joe Carey sprawled unconscious over the wheel of his car. Joe was something of a mess, with a bullet hole through his left shoulder and a livid crease along his bald skull. The car was half on, half off the road, with a front wheel smashed against a rimming boulder. The jumble of packages in the rear had not been touched, but the express pouch was gone.

Lifting the slight form of the old man in his arms, Tom stepped back into the saddle and headed for Gila Junction. Up to that moment he had never realized how emaciated was Linda's father. He had always seemed such a tenacious old man, spry and eager. Now, lying in Tom's arms, blue-veined eyelids closed, he seemed so worn and weary.

Linda saw them coming and was standing on the sagging porch of the stage lunchroom as Tom swung to the ground with his burden. A white ring formed about her lips, but her eyes were calm, steady.

"I've told him a dozen times he'd have a wreck with that old chariot. How bad is he, Tom?"

"Bad enough, Linda. He's been shot."

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"Shot!"

"Two miles up the road. The express pouch was gone."

Linda caught her breath and leaned forward to gaze at the pale face of her father. "Bring him to the back room."

Tom spent fifteen minutes cranking the old wall phone. In the course of time he made two connections and received satisfactory answers from the doctor in Tucson and the sheriff in Brinden. Linda was going about the business of first aid in her usually calm and self-sufficient manner. Tom wondered if there was anything in the world that could upset her for any length of time. Poise was an admirable thing in the desert, but natural or assumed, Linda carried it too far. It never occurred to him that it might be her means of defense against things he would never understand.

This was on a Friday. Mid-afternoon of the following Tuesday, Linda stood on the porch gazing westward along the gray ribbon of road that split the desert toward Tucson. The sky was a brass platter under which broiled a world stricken by heat. An endless world, it seemed, with rolling hills veiled in shimmering curtains. Cactus and mesquite stood starkly submissive to the high-riding god of the sky. Not a breath of air stirred the drooping poplars down by the auto camps. Oppressive, pulsating silence. A woman without proper mental adjustment would have gone mad with it all.

Joe Carey was sleeping again, the weathered skin above his cheek bones dark with fever. Linda had changed the damp cloths so often that morning they had become a parade of white before her aching eyes. She hoped the doctor would come again on the afternoon stage, though he had made no definite promise.

At length a steady drumming beat against her ears, and a darker object broke the white mirror of heat and came lumbering eastward. When it drew up before the warped building, the driver descended to replenish the gurgling radiator. "How's Joe?" he called to her.

"About the same. You didn't bring Doctor Carter?"

The hiss of the overheated radiator drowned his reply. Linda glanced at the stage. There was only one passenger, a man who sat near an open window with chin cupped in a white palm. He was gazing at Linda with eyes the warmth and color of sleet. His mouth was wide, with thin, straight lips. Black hair powdered with dust stood out over a low, predatory forehead. His gaze could never be interpreted as impersonal, and Linda experienced a crawling sensation at the back of her neck. Quickly she turned indoors.

FIVE minutes later the stage departed with a roar that shook the flimsy building. A cloud of blue smoke was left to float on the still, hot air. Linda glanced in on her father; the noise had not disturbed him. She hoped that he would sleep on through until night brought a slight cessation of heat.

When she returned to the lunchroom the lone passenger was standing there on the porch, staring through the open door. His hands were by his sides; long hands, with slim, flexible fingers slightly curled. He was narrow of shoulder, but the open shirt disclosed a deep valley at the base of his neck—an indication of physical strength.

"You didn't go on," she stated, needing the sound of her own voice.

"No, ma'am."

"Changing here for Brinden?"

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"No," shortly. "I couldn't stay on that stage another minute. The heat. It blasts through those windows and burns you to a crisp. I'm not used to it. I thought if you didn't mind, I'd stay here and rest until the night stage."

"Why—yes; just sit down. Would you like a glass of water?"

She passed him on the way to the well for a fresh pail of water, and felt his cold eyes following her. The man was lying; he didn't seem the least bit disturbed by the heat; wasn't even perspiring. There was little of dignity for a person at the end of a pump handle, but Linda did her best. Over her shoulder she saw the man flicking the whorls of fine road dust from the seat of a porch chair.

When she handed him the glass of water, his sudden smile startled her; an expression that broke his cold features into tiny fragments of warmth. Nodding his thanks he sipped slowly.

"The stage driver tells me you have a sick man here."

"My father. He was shot in a holdup."

"I thought holdups were a thing of the past out in this country. Badly hurt?"

"He'll live."

"Know who did it?" There was a shade of curiosity in those sleet-gray eyes.

"My father says there were two of them, both masked. No, we don't know."

"Hm-m-m." He placed the empty glass on the arm of the chair and stared out across the dusty yard. Facing them were the camps, the small cubicles with extended roofs, side by side like overgrown beehives. To the right of them the well, with its warped box covering. Beyond the cabins and the well, the row of poplars were rimming a dry arroyo. Fifty feet from the end of the porch stood Joe Carey's old car, with sun-cracked paint and worn upholstery. Tom Reed had dragged it in the day after the holdup. The stranger's eyes lingered on it for a time, and Linda's heart skipped a beat.

"And you're all alone here," he stated as though summing up a trend of thought.

"If you mean we run this place alone, yes. There's considerable traffic along the road."

"Not this time of year, I imagine. Your business is mostly during the winter months." He felt in a pocket and produced a black cigar. "It don't seem right," he mused, scratching a match. "I mean that a pretty girl like you should be holed up in such a place. The best years of your life."

THE remark was out of character; the man seated in the chair was one who would take what he wanted without preliminary preamble. To substantiate this, he did not go on to tell her that she belonged in the city, with its bright lights and gay living. None of the usual palaver. Instead, his features resumed the set look, eyes fastened on the gray back of a lizard which had flattened to the ground near the porch steps.

Linda retreated to the lunchroom, exasperated with her stirring fear. With a cloth she dusted the worn counter, rubbed diligently at the festoons of fly specks on the glass cigar case and wiped the tops of the mustard jars. Whenever she glanced up she could see the back of the man's head, with the spiral of blue smoke curling above the black hair. He seemed relaxed, now, and confident. Like a patient spider.

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In her father's room Linda shifted a curtain. Into the wasteland of the north struggled the rutted road leading to Brinden. It twisted and turned, vanishing at last into the fluttering edges of a mirage. What she could see of it was deserted. Every instinct warned her of impending trouble, and Tom Reed was not in sight. He had gone home the night before to attend to some neglected ranch work. Her face grew hot as her conscience acknowledged the need of him.

"Silly to let myself get worked up this way," she said aloud. "I'm perfectly capable of taking care of everything. I'm just tired."

But for some reason this self-made assurance failed her when she again glanced at the man on the porch. He hadn't moved, but his attitude was a menace. Up to the present Linda had scoffed at the so-called "woman's intuition," but now she had to admit the reception of a constant vibration.

It was an hour later, while she changed the cloth on her father's head, that she heard hoofs at the rear of the house. Glancing under a lowered blind she saw the sweat-crusted legs of a horse. Gathering the forces of her calm, she went out to greet Tom Reed. He swung from the saddle and batted a dusty hat against his leg.

"Hello," he said. "How's Joe?"

"I think he's some better, Tom. You've been riding hard."

"Wanted to get back. No telling when things will break."

She moved nearer to him. "Tom, there's a man on the front porch. He got off the Tucson stage. I don't like the look of him."

"So? You think—?"

"I don't know what to think."

"Well, I'll take my horse around to the shade. You meet me at the porch."

The stranger seemed half asleep as Tom approached, but the cold eyes missed not one detail of the newcomer's appearance.

"Hot, eh?" said Tom, kicking at the lizard near the steps. "Any mail for me, Linda?"

Linda Carey smiled. She was feeling more comfortable. "Nothing on the Tucson stage, Tom. This gentleman is stopping over until the night stage. I didn't hear your name..."

The stranger flowed to his feet, a movement smooth, effortless.

"Granden, ma'am. Louis Granden."

"This is Tom Reed, a rancher from up in the hills."

Granden held out a hand, long fingers curling about Tom's broad palm. "Glad to know you, Reed." Sleet-gray eyes locked with blue. "You look fit enough. Makes me seem like a chump, getting down with the heat this way. The lady was kind enough to offer me shade."

"It'll be cooler tonight," assured Tom. "Linda, do you mind if I put a sand ring around your wash basin? Shame to spoil good water, but—"

"This way, Tom."

LOUIS GRANDEN resumed his chair and lighted a fresh cigar. From some room in the rear he could hear a great splashing and spluttering. He guessed that the girl was standing near by with a towel. Interesting, to a degree. A sliver of a smile broke the thin line of his lips.

"What do you think of him, Tom?" whispered Linda.

"Not so good. I don't like his face."

"Then perhaps he is one of them."

"We'll find out in time. Has he looked at Joe's car?"

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"Only from the porch."

While they talked, a muffled popping came from the road. Looking out, they saw a small car laboring toward the Junction. The man driving was bent forward, pushing against the wheel as though to lend aid to the faltering machine. They saw a distinct expression of relief on his face as he tooled the overheated car off the road and into the yard. When it stopped, he got out and walked around it several times. Tom walked over to him.

"Damn the blankety-blank weather. I thought the thing would explode before I got here."

"Your radiator needs some water," nodded Tom.

"Water! Why, I've poured enough water into that thing. It just won't run when it's hot. I'm going to lay up until sundown." He followed Tom to the porch and plopped into a chair. He glanced curiously at Louis Granden and pulled out a pipe. Tom went on in, eying the card the man had handed him.

"Well—" questioned Linda.

"The name is Henry Hall and, according to this card, he's a cattle buyer. I think he lies like hell."

"Why?"

"Because cattle buyers are not around this time of year; because his face is hard and he wears a gun under his shoulder. A buzzard to the feast, maybe."

Trouble was cumulative, thought Linda. Was the overheated car just an excuse? She went in to look after Joe.

The three men sat out the afternoon on the porch. Conversation was fragmentary and widely spaced; mostly concerning the variations in heat as indicated by the thermometer on a post. It was significant to Tom that neither man removed his coat. To all appearances they were total strangers.

Just before sundown, Ben Pirtle came rattling in from Brinden. Ben was the local garage man in that town, a grimy individual, huge of bulk and always looking for a towing or repair job. Since the holdup, he had been hauling the express and freight from Gila Junction to Brinden. He swung his car in a wide circle across the yard and drew up with a flourish.

"Hiya, Tom," he greeted. "Ketched them robbers yet?"

"Not yet, Ben."

The big man shook his head. "Reckon you'll never do it now. Like as not they're clean outa the country. Linda gettin' supper?"

Louis Granden sucked at his cigar, seemingly engrossed in the intricacies of inner meditation. Pirtle's arrival had not interested him. Hall was tugging at the collar of his shirt, swearing softly at the heat. His brown-flecked eyes changed rapidly with his mood.

A SPLINTER of shadow crept eastward from the well box. The air seemed to move a little, stirring the pendent leaves of the poplars. An odor of cooking drifted out the lunchroom door.

"It's ready," announced Linda shortly. "Sorry it isn't more."

"Out of the goodness of your heart, ma'am," said Louis Granden. "You've enough to do without preparing food for we impostors."

They straddled up to the stools, Ben Pirtle eagerly, the rest with measured anticipation.

"I can recommend these beans to the inner man," said Tom.

"With biscuits," approved Henry Hall. "Ma'am, the desert has its rewards." He pushed a spoon through

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half a canned peach. "I've fared worse in better places."

Ben Pirtle emptied most of a bottle of catsup over his beans and crumpled in a biscuit. He ate noisily, brushing away the occasional drop of sweat that gathered at the tip of his nose.

The food seemed to loosen their tongues. They talked of cattle, of the new dam to be built beyond the hills, of the unpaved highway and dust. But Linda could not dismiss that sense of impending trouble. Despite the easy talk, the air was full of it. She tried to signal Tom, but he was too busy answering Hall's question about the holdup.

"It was done by green hands," he stated. "The sign was ample."

"In what way?"

"Oh, the way they shot up old Joe."

"Maybe they didn't want to kill him," put in Louis Granden.

"They tried hard enough. He must have made a run for it when they threw down on him; the left side of the car was splattered up with bullet holes."

Ben Pirtle waved a dripping fork. "That proves that it wasn't done by no local talent. Any gent in these parts with a hankerin' to pull a holdup, would shoot dead center. Joe Carey would of been killed. Nope," with a shake of the head, "they'll never ketch the gents. They're clean gone."

"The sheriff," said Tom, "combed this country mighty fine. I got hold of him before the holdups could get far. The highway was blocked in every direction. Every arroyo, every clump of cactus was inspected.

"I happened to be coming into Gila Junction that day and found old Joe spread across the wheel."

"Tough on the little lady," nodded Hall.

They left the room and sauntered out to the porch; all save Tom, who stepped into the kitchen for a moment.

"Are they going to leave?" asked Linda anxiously.

"Not yet. I've got to stay close by them. You understand."

She nodded. "Tom, you'll be careful?"

"I'm watching every step," he replied.

THE sun had nibbled deep into the horizon and offered, instead of heat, all the prismatic glory of a desert evening. Tom, returning to the porch, found that all had taken chairs.

"Along the far side of the road," he said, "I found empty shells that had been kicked out of one of those automatic pistols."

Ben Pirtle spat over the edge of the porch. "That proves it wasn't nobody in these parts. Ain't a gent in the desert would pack one of them fancy shootin' irons."

"Did they get much money?" asked Henry Hall.

"Oh, about eight or nine hundred dollars—the payroll for the Queen Bee mine just beyond Brinden. They haven't been working a big crew there this summer. The payroll money is sent in from Tucson by stage and Joe takes it on into the mine with other supplies."

"Eight or nine hundred," mused Henry Hall. "Hardly enough to take a chance for."

"Is that the car Carey was driving?" inquired Granden pointing his cigar at Joe's old crate.

"That's it."

"I think I can see the bullet holes in the side of it. They must have been nervous."

"Amateurs."

"But smart enough not to get

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ketched," insisted Ben Pirtle. He spat again and ran a crooked finger over his brow. The accumulated perspiration dropped to the front of his overalls.

"If the officers examined everyone that came out of the desert and found no pouch or large sum of money, the answer is that it must have been hidden before the robbers left the vicinity of the holdup."

"That seems the likely thing," Tom agreed. "The men were afoot when they pulled the job. They'd left a car behind a low hill about a hundred yards from the road. We found grease where it had been standing."

"Car tracks are easy to follow," suggested Hall.

"Not after they get to the highway. That's the way they went."

There followed a brief silence broken only by the moist hiss of Pirtle's steady expectoration. The dusk was deepening rapidly; the broad shadows in the yard had faded. Linda entered the lunchroom.

"Amateurs or not, I fail to see a hitch in their plans," said Henry Hall after a time. "They seem to have got away with it."

"But there was a hitch," said Tom.

"Eh?" Pirtle twisted in the chair to gaze at him.

"When I went back to get Joe's car, I found the express pouch."

Louis Granden flipped his cigar into the yard and rubbed the palms of his hands over thin knees. "Where?"

"Well, I had to do the job alone, so I got underneath the car to tie fast those cross rods it's steered with. As I lay there on my back, I happened to see a bundle tied into the channel of the main frame. It was the old pouch."

"They hadn't taken it with them," stated Granden flatly.

"No. And I just lay there and looked at the thing for maybe five minutes. It was tied into the frame with an old bandanna handkerchief. It looked to me as though that bandanna had been used for a mask; tobacco juice had been sprinkled over one end of it; as though the wearer hadn't troubled to lift the flap when he spit."

"The pouch was intact?" said Granden.

"No, it wasn't. The lock had been broken off. Old newspapers, folded flat, had been stuffed in the pouch. The money was gone."

HENRY HALL drew in a quick, deep breath. "Then what," he asked, "was the idea of putting the pouch under the car?" He knocked the ashes from his pipe and stuffed it in a pocket.

Tom sent a quick glance at the lunchroom door and saw Linda hovering just inside. Tiny wrinkles of worry creased the corners of his eyes.

"Well," he said, "the way I figure it, the original idea was safety. They didn't want to be caught with the money or pouch. The plan was, no doubt, to wait until the fuss had died down and then go back to the old car for the booty. Quite likely they figured the car would be towed in, probably to Brinden. It just happened that I found an old wheel here at the Junction that would fit. That saved Joe Carey a towing fee, and those fees come high in this country, eh, Pirtle?"

Ben Pirtle stood up and shook his heavy shoulders. The back of his neck glistened with perspiration. He looked rather longingly at his own car, not twenty feet away.

"But," said Louis Granden, "I see no object in tying a paper-filled pouch to the under part of the car."

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"Maybe it wasn't filled with paper when it was tied under there the first time. I told you the lock was broken. One of those holdup gents doubled back, possibly after I found old Joe and brought him in. It wouldn't be much of a trick to take the money and put paper in its place. One of those men double-crossed the other, I'd like to see what happens when they meet."

Something like a sigh whistled through Granden's teeth. Henry Hall sat rigid, brown-flecked eyes fastened on Ben Pirtle. The garage man was pasty white. His knees were sagging.

"It's a lie," he croaked. "I didn't go back. I—"

Henry Hall's right hand slid under his coat. A dull object arched up and there came a sharp report. The bullet smacked into the ceiling of the porch above Pirtle's head, bringing down a fine spray of dust. Louis Granden was out of his chair like a cat. His shoulder struck Hall squarely in the stomach and sent the man over backward. Tom heard Linda's frightened cry as he dived for Ben Pirtle. For a minute the garage man fought like a wild beast; then he collapsed into a quivering heap, broken phrases of denial bubbling from his twitching lips.

Louis Granden was standing beside Henry Hall, holding a piece of metal the other section of which was clamped about Hall's wrist. The automatic pistol was lying near the edge of the porch.

"If you'll fetch that big ox over here I'll link him with his partner," said Granden.

PIRTLE offered little resistance.

"And who are you?" asked Tom when the handcuff had snapped about the hairy wrist.

"A special agent for the express people." Granden didn't seem to be breathing a bit faster.

"My gosh! You sure gave me one bad afternoon."

"I guessed as much, my friend; but I had to play the game."

"I had Pirtle marked down easy enough, but whether you or Hall was his pal I couldn't tell."

"Both appeared capable of doing the job, eh? Well, not wishing to brag, I'll say that I am, at least, a much better shot than Hall. I wouldn't have splattered up the old car in any such fashion." He glanced at the lunchroom door. Linda Carey stood there, eyes wide and an old pistol in her hand. "Were you looking for someone to shoot, ma'am?"

The light of the gasoline lamp showed a red stain stealing up the girl's neck. She stooped, laid the pistol on the floor, but made no answer.

"And now what?" asked Tom.

"I'll head for Brinden with these two gentlemen. I suspect I'll find the Queen Bee money at Pirtle's garage."

Tom Reed shook his head. "Pirtle never had the money," he said.

"No? Then Hall—"

"Neither of them, Granden."

"Oh, I see; the pouch had never been broken into. You just framed that story to make them break."

"I framed the story, yes, and for that purpose. But that old express pouch hasn't been unlocked in years. Joe Carey never carried money in it. The pouch was sort of a decoy. When he had money to deliver at the mine, he always slipped it into some ordinary package of freight or express. Last Friday he put the payroll in a case of eggs. Ben Pirtle delivered that case of eggs to the mine storeroom yesterday!"

THE END

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Her eyes dulled strangely as she looked into his

Murder—In Some Degree

By GEORGE F. WORTS

Was Lawyer Gillian Hazeltine, fighting a bitter courtroom battle, combating a clever hypnotist?

THE STORY HAS JUST BEGUN—START IT NOW

LAWYER GILLIAN HAZELTINE happened to be at the Greenfield airport one evening when a pretty girl giving the name of Mary Brown reserved two tickets for the morning plane to Dallas a couple of days later. He thought nothing of it at the time.

A day or so later Gillian received a telephone call from Dr. Hobart Creed, head of the Hobart Creed Hospital at Greenfield, asking Gillian to come out. The aged doctor told Gillian of his plan, which he had not confided in anyone else, of leaving the $15,000,000 hospital to his favorite understudy, Dan Starbuck, a surgeon. Dr. Creed was worried because of mysterious occurrences in the hospital, one of them being the systematic theft by someone of narcotics.

At the hospital Gillian met Hannah Star-

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buck, Dan's old maid aunt, who was suffering from a heart ailment; Dr. Hoyle, Dan's anæsthetist; Dr. Claudia Barnum, Dan's good looking female assistant; Nurse Nancy Green, who seemed to be a trouble maker; and the girl he had seen at the airport buying tickets. He learned her real name was Carolyn Kelly, and that she was a nurse.

While Gillian was pondering the strange events at the hospital, he received word that Dr. Hoyle had been found murdered in his office. Dan's aunt, Hannah, died the same night after being given medicine by her nephew—and Dan and Carolyn Kelly eloped, heading for Mexico City.

Mark Storm, the district attorney who immediately took charge of things, announced his intention of extraditing Dan Starbuck for the murder of Dr. Hoyle, who had been stabbed with a surgical knife of Starbuck's.

CHAPTER VI *(Continued).*

ARSENIC.

HAZELTINE shook his head. "I don't know. I wish I did. Doctor, will you phone the hospital that they're to show every courtesy to a Mr. Aaron Savage, who will ask questions of everyone in the place? He's my assistant. I want him to check up on alibis."

"Certainly. I'll attend to it right now." The old man telephoned the hospital and gave orders. Then he looked at Gillian hopefully and said, "What clues did you find?"

"None of importance. The knife in Hoyle's throat is Starbuck's."

"Do you think Starbuck killed him?"

"I honestly haven't formed an opinion. Storm found dozens of empty gin, whisky and cocaine bottles under Starbuck's bed. They could have been planted there—or Starbuck may be a secret drinker and the man who's been pilfering your cocaine. But Storm will certainly have a case."

"Will he extradite him?"

Dr. Creed was thoughtful for a moment, then, defiantly, "I never smelled liquor on Starbuck's breath or saw any symptom of cocaine."

"No. He doesn't look like a drinker—or a hophead. I'm convinced that Mark Storm is somehow involved in this mess. He's damned clever. Once again, doctor, I wish you'd let me draw your will, leaving all this property to a foundation. Whatever Storm's game is, that is the surest way to beat him."

But the old man was stubbornly shaking his head. "I don't believe in directorates for institutions like this."

"Are you still determined to make Starbuck your heir?"

"I don't know," Dr. Creed said wearily. "I'm confused. I'll wait for developments."

Gillian went to the door. With his hand on the knob, he turned.

"If anyone on your staff—or any one else—makes any kind of suggestion that you substitute another man for Starbuck in your will—will you let me know? Has any one ever done it?"

"No. But I'll let you know. And if Dan Starbuck is the scoundrel he appears to be, I'll certainly leave my property to one of my other men!"

GILLIAN returned to his car and drove downtown to his office. The mystery of the Hobart Creed Hospital, however it might resolve, was now out of his hands and in the domain of the Police Department. But he could not dismiss it from his mind. It still presented many aspects of a baffling mystery.

Because, to Gillian, any mystery was the very salt of his existence, he could

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not let this one drop. His first act, on reaching his office, was to send for the head of his investigation bureau, a sharp-nosed, bright-eyed young man named Henderson.

To Henderson he said: "Get me all you can on these four people at the Creed Hospital: Dr. Lee Tichman, Dr. Claudia Barnum, a nurse named Nancy Green, and Cleve Salter, an orderly. Check on their activities since ten last night, and have them tailed all day today and tomorrow."

And when Henderson had gone to attend to these matters, Gillian put in a telephone call for an old client and an old friend, one Silky Davis, once a prominent and notorious bootlegger, now a prominent, prosperous and very respectable brewer. Silky Davis had not lost touch with the underworld of Greenfield, and his old mob, now gone respectable, had lost little of its cleverness.

To Silky Davis, he said, "Mark Storm is back and is up to some dirty work in connection with the Creed Hospital. The story will break in this afternoon's papers, so I won't go into details. What I want you to find out is, when did Storm hit town? He claims he returned last evening. I think he's been here longer. Find out. Find out where he's been spending his time and who he's been seeing. Check up on all his old hideouts."

And Silky said, cheerfully, "Okay, boss. Just leave it to Silky. You'll be hearin' from me."

It was not long before he made a report. Mark Storm, he had ascertained, had been in Greenfield at least a month.

"He's been hiding out in John Redfern's apartment," Silky added. John Redfern had been acting district attorney in Mark Storm's absence. "It's pretty hard to check up on all the people who came and went in that month," Silky went on, "but there was one fellow I'm trying to track down—a young fellow of about thirty, with a scar on his forehead."

Gillian said to himself, "Tichman!" He put another question to Silky: "Have you a record of a red-headed woman or a platinum blonde going up there?"

"No, boss. No dames. Anything else?"

"Yes. Go to the Creed Hospital and take a good look at an orderly named Cleve Salter. Then find out if he's been going to Redfern's apartment."

"Okay, boss."

THERE were other reports to consider—the preliminary reports turned in by Gillian's investigation department, on Nancy Green, Dr. Tichman, Cleve Salter and Claudia Barnum. Gillian saw nothing of importance in these reports, but he told Henderson to keep a check on these four people.

Another report to which he attached no significance at the moment was the one made by the fingerprint expert of the Greenfield Homicide Squad.

"There are old fingerprints, probably of Starbuck's, on the handle, and old fingerprints of Dr. Hoyle himself on the silver skull plate," the fingerprint man said.

"The fresh ones were wiped off," Gillian said.

"Sure. And the guy who wiped 'em off must have done the job in a hurry, or he'd have caught the old ones, too."

Gillian must have been thinking of something else, for that comment aroused no suspicions.

"Did you see that little oblong dent in the wall?" the fingerprint man asked.

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"Yes."

"What did you make of it, Mr. Hazeltine?"

"Nothing."

"Yeah. It has us stumped, too. Anything else I can do?"

"That's all this time. Thanks."

The Hobart Creed Hospital scandal broke in the early afternoon editions. The newspapers took up the case with enthusiasm.

On the front pages of the newspapers on the morning following were even more exciting developments. The district attorney's office had broken its silence. Mr. Storm would not yet speak for publication, but one of his deputies admitted that the district attorney was very much interested in the highly efficient embalming and burial of Dr. Starbuck's aunt.

This, the deputy said, would be investigated first, the brutal murder of Dr. Hoyle later.

A warrant of disinterment had been issued and the coffin containing the elderly spinister taken from the grave and photographed by perhaps a dozen newspaper photographers at sunup.

The body was rushed to the coroner's office, an autopsy performed.

The stomach was speedily dispatched to the laboratories of Harry Zarrow, the city chemist, and the report was announced early enough for the noon editions that the stomach of Miss Hannah Starbuck contained enough arsenic to kill five strong men!

CHAPTER VII.

AN AMBITIOUS WOMAN.

GILLIAN had an unexpected caller that afternoon. His secretary said that Dr. Claudia Barnum was in the waiting room and wished to see him on a rather urgent matter, but would come later if he was busy now.

"Show her in," Gillian said.

The handsome red-headed surgeon was smartly dressed in dark green, with a smart little green hat to match. It seemed to him that she was paler than usual and that her beautiful eyes were tired. But her voice was as serene, as musical as ever.

Smiling, she said, "Mr. Hazeltine, I've come to tell you the story of my life—and to retain you as my counsel. It will probobly strike you as a rather unusual request. Perhaps I should say selfish. You see, since I was a girl of ten, I've been determined to become a great surgeon. Nothing has been permitted to interfere with that ambition. I've sacrificed everything for it."

"You think," Gillian guessed, "that the scandal of this case—these murders—may hurt your reputation."

"Exactly. My father and both my uncles, on his side of the family, were great surgeons. All three were brilliant men. They might have become famous—they might have built a hospital just like this one—if each of them hadn't had a great weakness. Each of them drank himself to death. My father was the last. I was with him when he died. It was horrible. He died in delirium tremens. And when I saw him dying, I made the vow that I would become not only a brilliant surgeon, but a famous surgeon, a great surgeon—that I would surmount all the weaknesses, that I would let nothing come between me and my goal."

She smiled faintly. "So far I haven't. I began studying medicine and surgery when I was ten. I read books, I watched operations. I knew

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it wouldn't be an easy road. People still don't trust women doctors or surgeons. I'm on the way to a real success. And as you guessed, I will not let this scandal or any other scandal touch my reputation—spoil my aims. It's certain that I will be called to the witness stand to testify in this case, isn't it?"

"I'm afraid it is."

"There's no way I can avoid it?"

"Not unless you run away, and that would ruin your reputation."

"I won't run away. I'll stay and fight. But I want your advice."

"There's little advice I can give you, except this: tell the truth. Tell the whole truth. If you're caught in a lie, your reputation will be ruined. Do you think Dan Starbuck killed his aunt and Dr. Hoyle?"

"I honestly don't k n o w, but I think the circumstances are appallingly against him. If he did kill him, he is the greatest fool that ever lived. Because he was on his way to becoming the surgeon I'd like to become—the greatest in America."

"It may be a close case," Gillian remarked. "A great many people are under suspicion."

"Including me."

"You will doubtless be cleared of the slightest suspicion."

SHE bent forward, her eyes steadily on his. "Mr. Hazeltine, if I am called to that witness stand, and if this case remains as confused as it now stands, do you know what my attitude will be?"

Gillian smiled. "I could hazard a guess."

"Claudia Barnum," she said, "will come first, and second, and third—and all the rest. I will certainly not be sacrificed."

"Even if it means sacrificing some one else?"

"I will sacrifice no one if it isn't necessary. But I will certainly protect myself. Why should I throw my life away? Don't you realize what I've gone through? I used to be a beautiful girl. I could have had loads of suitors. I might have married a man with loads of money and had beautiful clothes and jewels and all that. I passed that by.

"Long hours, overwork, studying, worrying—all those things killed my beauty and my youth. What would I have left if my career were nipped in the bud? Nothing!"

"It doesn't seem to me, doctor, that you need advice—or an adviser."

"But I don't want to make mistakes."

"I'd like to know, doctor, whether or not you believe in hypnotism."

She straightened up, stared at him a moment, then gave a soft little laugh. "Hypnotism? That's an odd question."

"Do you believe in it?"

"In the popular understanding of the word—not at all. In my researches into psychology, I have never yet found a person, man or woman, who could hypnotize another person unless the patient, or the subject, was willing to be hypnotized. There is no such thing as hypnotism as the public understands the word. If I were to stretch out on that couch and relax completely, you could make me go to sleep—but only provided that I wanted to let you put me to sleep."

"The enforcement of one's will upon another—" Gillian began.

"Is not hypnotism," Dr. Barnum finished. "That's merely the domination of a weaker will by a stronger one. You are a strong-willed man. Obviously, you dominate your wife—"

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"You might be surprised," Gillian chuckled, then became grave again. "Would you say that it was utterly impossible for one person, let us say, to have hypnotized another to administer arsenic to Miss Starbuck?"

"Utterly impossible. Among other things, a person under hypnosis will do nothing immoral or criminal."

"I'm glad to know that," Gillian sighed. "I'd like to ask a very important question. Have you heard any rumor, or seen or heard anything directly, that might lead you to suspect that Mark Storm, the district attorney, or any of his representatives, assistants or associates, was in touch with any one at the hospital in the past month?"

Dr. Barnum opened her mouth to reply. There was that quick sparkle of interest in her eyes which made Gillian realize that she was on the verge of making a prompt and valuable answer to his question. Then, instantly, the look changed to one of vagueness, the very expression of her mouth changed, and he knew that she had decided to withhold that information.

With a little headshake, she answered, "I'm sorry—I don't, Mr. Hazeltine."

And she got up to go. She held out her hand and said, "At least, I've paved the way. If I find myself in hot water, if I need your help, I'm coming back."

"By all means," Gillian said. "I honestly don't think you have anything to worry about." And as she started for the door, he added, "If you should want to change your career—there'll always be a place for you in this office. The public may not be sold on women surgeons, but I'd love to turn you loose on a few juries!"

Evidently that little talk cleared up the problems in Dr. Barnum's mind, or gave her the courage of her resolutions, for she did not return for further advice."

OVERNIGHT, Mark Storm petitioned the Governor of the State for an extradition warrant for Dr. Daniel Starbuck on a charge of suspicion of murder, and for Mrs. Daniel Starbuck, as a material witness, from the sovereign state of Mexico.

The next day Silky Davis telephoned Gillian. He had been able to find no evidence that Cleve Salter, the hospital orderly, had been visiting Redfern's apartment to see Storm.

Aaron Savage reported on the alibis of Dr. Tichman, Claudia Barnum, Cleve Salter and Nancy Green. He said, "It's hard to dig up any useful information on such alibis. There is no question that all four were on the ninth floor when Hoyle was murdered, and all four had an opportunity to poison Hannah Starbuck. Nancy Green was in the room next door, getting it ready for a patient. Cleve Salter was seen around the third floor at intervals all evening.

"I also found out that Nancy Green and Salter were seen in earnest conversation not long after you talked to Starbuck's aunt, that night. But getting back to the time Miss Starbuck was killed, Claudia Barnum was alone with Miss Starbuck for a time—so was Starbuck, of course. And Tichman was on the third floor attending a patient some time between ten and ten-thirty. I can't find out anything about his activities, but it looks as if he would have had an opportunity to go to Room 310."

"How about the time of Hoyle's murder?" Gillian asked.

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"What you told me about the actual time interval needed for the Hoyle murder—that's the main trouble. I'm convinced that Hoyle was—or could have been—lured into that office and stabbed to death in a matter, actually, of seconds. It could have been over with, from start to finish, in twenty or thirty seconds. So that any of these four could have done it and been back at his or her duties before being missed."

"How about Cleve Salter?"

"At the time of Hoyle's murder," Savage answered, "Salter was cleaning up a stretcher in a sort of laundry, only three doors from Hoyle's office. He would have had ample motive for killing Hoyle. He knew that Hoyle and Starbuck were good friends. He hated Starbuck for having reprimanded him several times for carelessness. He's the type who would brood over a fancied injury. I'd call him an ugly customer."

"Get me all you can on him," Gillian said.

And on a morning a few days later, Mr. and Mrs. Dan Starbuck, the romantic couple whose pictures adorned the front pages of every Greenfield newspaper, were greeted at the Greenfield airport by upwards of thirty reporters, news photographers, and news reel men and a delegation of about five thousand morbidly curious townspeople.

The young surgeon was spirited off to the Fourth Precinct Jail and was there booked formally on a homicide charge. His bride was, after questioning, permitted her freedom.

GILLIAN learned all this, or most of it, from the newspapers. He had already gleaned that the district attorney would bring the young man to trial on the charge of having murdered his aunt by administering to her a lethal dose of arsenic in order to inherit her estate, of which he was the legal heir.

Thus was neatly established a perfect motive for the alleged murder. The charge of murdering Dr. Hoyle, the anæsthetist, would not be pressed, Gillian believed, until Dr. Starbuck's trial for the murder of his aunt was over. Nor would the third charge be pressed—that of criminal negligence in connection with the death of a hemophiliac, or bleeder, on the operating table.

Seldom in Gillian's career as a criminal lawyer had he known a case in which the defendant was so hopelessly hemmed in by serious charges. If Mark Storm failed to convict him for the murder of his Aunt Hannah, he could try him for the murder of Dr. Hoyle; and if, by some legal miracle, the unfortunate young man escaped the chair or a life sentence for this latter charge, the district attorney would bring the criminal negligence charge against him.

It seemed to Gillian that poor young Dr. Starbuck, even if he were as innocent as a new born babe, had as slim chances of running this gantlet of charges and retaining his life and freedom as, say, a rabbit would have in plunging headlong into a pack of whippets.

Shortly before noon of the day of Dan Starbuck's return to the scene of his alleged crimes, Dr. Creed telephoned to Gillian. He wanted merely to know if Gillian would take Dan Starbuck's case.

"I am pretty thoroughly convinced that he is as guilty as Cain," Dr. Creed said. "But inasmuch as he was always loyal to me, and a hard worker, I feel it my duty to retain the best lawyer

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available. Will you take the case?"

"I never take a case," Gillian said firmly, "in which I can't see at least a ray of hope. I can see absolutely no ray of hope for Dr. Starbuck. Besides, he has good lawyers of his own."

Dr. Creed did not argue or protest. He shared, Gillian knew, the public's conviction that Surgeon Starbuck was a secret drunkard, a cocaine addict, and thrice a murderer.

"I'll want to see you on another matter in a few days," the doctor said.

"Another will?"

"Yes."

"Another beneficiary?"

"Yes."

"Who is it this time. doctor?"

"I haven't quite made up my mind. I'll phone you."

CHAPTER VIII.

GILLIAN DECIDES.

SHORTLY after luncheon Gillian received a caller—a caller whom he had been, in a way, expecting. She entered his private office heavily veiled, a slim, small person. She was wearing the veil, obviously, to avoid attracting attention on the street. And when she lifted the veil, although Gillian had been expecting her, he was greatly shocked, for suffering had refined the little Irish girl's beauty, had given her a tragic kind of loveliness. Her sapphire eyes in her small white face were enormous, and their beauty was enhanced by soft shadows in the clear white skin about them.

Her eyes were not bloodshot, nor was her nose pink or her mouth raw-looking, so he knew she had not been crying. And he guessed that she was the kind who took her punishment standing up.

Her bravery was touching, and he was suddenly resentful at the circumstances which had caused an innocent girl such suffering. He had seen other girls like this one face the future she faced—a future of the faintest hope and the darkest dread—and he pitied her. He pitied her particularly because he could hold out no hope for her. Girls in her predicament—girls with husbands or lovers or brothers about to be hurled into the heartless machine of the law—so many of these girls had come to him, expecting him to perform miracles.

This girl surprised him by not bursting into a piteous plea for his help. She said quietly, in a small, controlled voice, "Dr. Starbuck wondered if you would come to see him at the jail. He wants very much to ask your advice."

"I'll drop down, of course. But I'm afraid there's very little useful advice I can give him."

"We want very much for you to take his case."

"But he has an excellent firm of lawyers, Mrs. Starbuck."

She said spiritedly, "I know them! Tim Harnedy and Orel Lawler are good lawyers, but they're both in Nevada on a mining case. And Ira MacFarland isn't interested in criminal law. All he thinks about is his pecan grove. You are the only lawyer who can get my husband out of this horrible mess. It's a case for a great detective, as well as a great lawyer, and you're both!"

HE told her what he had told Dr. Creed:

"I never touch a case in which there isn't some ray of hope."

"Isn't Dan's innocence a ray of hope? Oh, I know your reputation. You won't take a case unless you think

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there's a fighting chance. But there is a fighting chance! He is innocent of both these charges. He did not kill his aunt! She died of angina pectoris."

"How do you account for the arsenic found in her stomach?"

"I can't account for any of it. It's a job for some one much cleverer than I am. But I know he is being made the goat for some one. All those empty bottles found under his bed! Mr. Hazeltine, I've known Dr. Starbuck for two years. I've worked on countless cases with him. If he ever drank, if he ever used cocaine, I'd know it. When a girl loves a man, she notices everything. And he did not kill Dr. Hoyle. Some one did it and deliberately fastened the guilt on him by using that knife. Don't you agree that it was pretty crude?"

"Passion is pretty crude, too," Gillian argued. "Who killed Dr. Hoyle?"

"Tichman!" she cried.

"Can you prove that?"

"If I could, I'd be telling it to the police. He's always been jealous of Dan. And when Dr. Creed began showing such favoritism to Dan, Tichman was almost insane. I could swear that for a few days those black eyes of his had a red light in them! And the way he talked about Dan, behind his back—if he'd been a man I'd have knocked him down!"

"What about this bleeder case that died while your husband was operating on him?"

"A deliberate frame-up! Tichman was behind that, too. Oh, I know Tichman. How I've hated that man!"

She was, Gillian realized more and more, a fighter. She had not only the beauty of the Dublin type, but the fighting qualities of her race. And he liked her immensely because, plunged as she was in woe, she was being a good little sport. She wasn't having hysterics, and she wasn't planning to burst into tears.

He said gravely, "You don't recognize me, do you, Mrs. Starbuck?"

She looked puzzled. "Of course I recognize you!"

"You didn't recognize me the other night."

"At the hospital?"

"At the airport."

"I don't—" she began. Then, "The airport!"

"The telephone booth."

She was staring at him now with large, startled blue eyes.

"Oh," she gasped. "You weren't the man in that telephone booth!"

He nodded.

Her eyes glistened. "I had to hide," she explained. "I saw Tichman. I'd just bought the tickets for Dan and me—for our elopement. We had planned to do it very secretly—to slip away without telling a soul. If Tichman had seen me there he would have suspected. It would have spoiled everything."

It was, Gillian felt, a very satisfactory explanation.

He said, "Do you know if Dr. Tichman has ever practiced hypnotism?"

"He practices it every minute of his life! He knows how hypnotic those black eyes of his are. He has half the nurses scared out of their wits. But please talk to Dan. He can tell you all about Tichman."

THEY went down to the Fourth Precinct Jail, and were presently being led down a corridor to the cell occupied by Dr. Starbuck. The young surgeon was seated on the edge of his cot.

When his wife and Gillian stopped at the barred door, he jumped up with

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a wan grin of excitement. He looked sick. He was unshaved. His eyes were gaunt and his face was haggard. For a moment the bride and groom clung to each other, with the bars between, then the young man said in a shaky voice:

"It was good of you to come, Mr. Hazeltine. It all seems like a horrible nightmare. My God, they're charging me with three murders! And the only thing I'm guilty of is running off that way without telling them. I know it looks as if I were running away, with the law at my heels. I know I was a damn fool to do it. But for months Dr. Creed had kept me so busy that I didn't have a chance to be alone with Carolyn five minutes at a time. He kept me operating from the time I got up in the morning until I fell in bed at night, drunk with exhaustion."

"Not drunk," Gillian said, "on what was in those bottles they found under your bed."

"How could I drink," the young man demanded, "and do the work I was doing? I'll admit I made two mistakes—to run away, and to bury my aunt in such a hurry. That was sheer insanity. I should have realized how it would look. But you don't know how desperate we were! I was working sixteen hours a day to clear up my schedule, so we could get away on the date we had planned. My aunt's death was only another frustration to our plans. If we hadn't gotten away that night, we'd have never gotten away!"

"Don't," Gillian advised him, "let a jury hear you say that your aunt's death was just another frustration to your plans."

The young man said passionately, "I'll do what you say if you'll only take my case."

"He won't take it," Carolyn Starbuck said, "unless you can show him a ray of hope. You've never lost a murder case, have you, Mr. Hazeltine?"

Gillian shook his head. "And part of my influence with juries is their knowledge that I never go into court to defend a man who is guilty."

"If I could prove to you I'm innocent," the young man said, "I could have proved it to the magistrate who arraigned me."

"Did you know that Dr. Creed had been planning to leave you, in his will, his entire establishment—all the buildings, g r o u n d s, equipment—everything?"

Dr. Starbuck stared at him with the open mouth of shocked incredulity.

"Good Lord, no!" he whispered.

"He told me you were the best man he has ever had on his staff."

The surgeon made a grimace, as if he had tasted something bitter on his tongue.

"Then that gives us the motive we've wanted. I thought Tichman was jealous because Creed was pushing me along so rapidly. Tichman must have heard about that will. Has Dr. Creed made it yet?"

"Not yet. And he swears he has mentioned it to no one but me."

"Tichman is back of it all!" Dr. Starbuck exclaimed.

GILLIAN said nothing. He let them argue. He had some definite suspicions of his own. Back of Tichman was Mark Storm. Gillian had been willing to believe, all along, in Dr. Starbuck's innocence. Having talked with him and his wife, he had learned that they possessed a look that he had come to know well in his years of courtroom experience—the aspect of innocence.

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He decided suddenly that he would take the case. In doing so, he was violating the strict rule he had laid down—never to take a case in which there was not some satisfactory loophole. He saw no loopholes in this case. If he could possibly clear Dr. Starbuck of the charge for which he would be shortly under indictment, the young man would be re-arrested and tried for the murder of Dr. Hoyle, and even if Gillian cleared him of that, he could be again arrested on a criminal negligence and homicide charge in connection with the death, on the operating table, of the hemophiliac.

Gillian believed that somewhere in this maze of circumstance he might find the key, just as a logger finds the key-log in a jam and lets the mass go sweeping clear.

But back of his decision was not merely his wish to help an innocent man establish his innocence. There was another reason: his hatred of Mark Storm. Mark Storm had, the other morning at the hospital, thrown down the gauntlet to him—had suavely, urbanely jeered at him. And Gillian had never refused an invitation to lock horns with that courtly, scheming gentleman.

He said, "Dr. Starbuck, I'm going to take this case. And I'll want a great deal of help from both of you."

For the first time, there were tears in the eyes of Carolyn Starbuck, but these were tears of gratitude.

"I'll want all the information either of you can give me, bearing on the habits, the little personal habits, of Dr. Tichman, Dr. Barnum, and Nancy Green. Mrs. Starbuck, do you intend to resume your work at the hospital?"

"I will if I can be of any help. But will Dr. Creed let me?"

"I'll arrange that."

Gillian and Mrs. Starbuck left the jail shortly. Outside the jail, several reporters and newspaper photographers were waiting. Gillian, answering questions and posing with the beautiful Mrs. Starbuck for the photographers, fired his first shot in the campaign. He said he had studied the case with the greatest care and was convinced that Daniel Starbuck was an innocent man; therefore he was taking his case.

And if these sentiments had a familiar ring to the newspaper men, it was because Gillian had often expressed it as his belief that most murder cases were tried in the newspapers, and that a verdict was reached in the jury's mind before that jury ever entered the courtroom.

But it was, as an opening shot, a rather late one. For days, the newspapers had been shrieking with headlines manufactured in the district attorney's office. The tabloids already referred to Dr. Starbuck as the "Boy Butcher." It was darkly hinted that more than three deaths could be laid at the door of Dr. Starbuck.

And even as Gillian and the lovely Irish girl stood talking to the reporters, Mark Storm struck again. A deputy sheriff pushed through the crowd of newspaper men, and served Mrs. Starbuck with a warrant for her arrest on the charge of having been an accessory after the fact, an accomplice, in the murder of Miss Hannah Starbuck.

SHE was taken back into the jail, this time a prisoner. Gillian immediately appealed to the nearest magistrate for a writ of habeas corpus. When, after masterful arguments, he finally secured the writ and returned to the Fourth Precinct Jail, it was only

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to learn that Mrs. Starbuck had been transferred to the Sixth Precinct Jail.

He promptly presented himself before another magistrate, secured another writ of habeas corpus, and hastened to the Sixth Precinct Jail. There, he was courteously informed that Mrs. Starbuck had remained only an hour, and had then been transferred to the Clinton Street Jail.

In legal circles, this procedure is known as the merry-go-'round. It could be kept up indefinitely if Mark Storm wanted Mrs. Starbuck kept out of circulation. He would transfer her from jail to jail as fast as Gillian could secure writs of habeas corpus.

In all his battles with Mark Storm, Gillian had never known him to take such pains. It appeared that, now that Gillian had entered the lists, Storm was prepared to give him battle every inch of the way.

Gillian had wanted Carolyn Starbuck to work on the case with him. She was a clever girl, and a fighter, and her help would have been invaluable. When he was denied this help, he went ahead with the case with his usual methodicalness.

Intending to leave no stone unturned, he put his entire staff to work on the Starbuck case, and he shelved all other cases.

In preparing for the defense of Starbuck, Gillian first of all made himself thoroughly familiar with hospital and, particularly, operating room routine. He read books on medicine and surgery. He became a regular patron of the Hobart Creed Hospital. Overcoming his aversion to operating rooms in action, he spent all his free time watching operations, watching especially Dr. Tichman, Dr. Barnum, and Nancy Green.

He was interested to note that the platinum blond nurse had been transferred to Dr. Tichman's operating crew. Each of the three, and Cleve Salter in addition, he had watched by his investigation department, and each morning on his desk was a detailed account of their previous day's activities. Notably was a report that both Nancy Green and Cleve Salter had been seeing a great deal of Mark Storm.

The courtroom fight would be, he knew, a dramatic and sensational one. It was, perhaps, the strongest case that Storm had ever taken into a courtroom, yet it was, to Gillian, no stronger than it weakest link. He was still confident that he would, in due time, find that link which would bring about the collapse of the entire case against Dr. Starbuck.

At night he often lay awake, thinking—trying to worry a useful meaning from the little rectangular impression he had seen in the wet paint above Dr. Hoyle's body — that and the absence of fingerprints from the anæsthetist's silver skull plate. He had long since learned that no one in the hospital had known that Dr. Hoyle had once had a brain operation.

Because he was determined to reinstate himself in the good graces of the public, following his flight abroad and his return to active life, Mark Storm saw to it that the case of the People *versus* Starbuck was given plenty of advance publicity.

When the trail started, in spite of Gillian's exhaustive attempts, he had not yet learned how Dr. Lee Tichman had been instrumental in the poisoning of Hannah Starbuck, the stabbing of Dr. Hoyle or the death on the operating table of the hemophiliac.

So avid was the public's interest in the trial that the courthouse corridors,

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even the courthouse square, were a mass of humanity early on the day when the trial was scheduled to start.

CHAPTER IX.

DAMAGING TESTIMONY.

MARK STORM was not present during the impaneling of the jury. In the past, he had always taken the greatest pains in the selection of a jury that might be sympathetic to his case. His absence during the first two days of the Starbuck trial indicated how sure he was of the outcome. But to Gillian, not at all sure, the selection of this jury was vitally important. Often he had won cases simply by appealing to the emotions or prejudices of a single juror.

On the morning of the third day, with the jury complete, Mark Storm came to court with his battery of assistants, and the fight began. It was refereed by Judge Hiram K. Phelan. And its most prominent spectator was Dr. Hobart Creed, who was assisted to his seat in the first row by Dr. Lee Tichman. The founder of the greatest hospital in the State looked old—ten years older than on the night when he and Gillian had had such a lively dinner. His hands shook continuously, and he had a sickly, waxen pallor. Throughout the trial he sat and stared at witness after witness with hardly a change of expression. But not once did he glance at Dr. Starbuck.

Mark Storm, entering the courtroom, with the inevitable white carnation in his left lapel, might have been a visiting member of royalty, an archduke perhaps. As usual, he was dressed for the boulevard—any boulevard as long as it was one of style and distinction.

As he came down the aisle, he smiled and bowed to left and right, and when he neared Gillian he held out both hands and cried, "Ah! My dear Gillian! How fit you're looking!"

He was so charming, so poised, so utterly suave that Gillian, as usual, caught unprepared, felt himself blushing and growing hot at the ears, and his voice, when he responded, was thick and rough with the kind of embarrassment a boy feels when he is called on to recite in front of class.

Going on to his end of the counsel table, Storm left Gillian boiling with helpless wrath. Why, he angrily demanded of himself, did this great rascal affect him so?

Mark Storm, in his preliminary address to the jury, stated that he would prove that the defendant had boldly and carefully planned the murder of his Aunt Hannah, in order that he might inherit her wealth to which, under her will, he was entitled at her death, and that the co-defendant, who was being tried as an accessory after the fact, aided and abetted the defendant in his plans of murder and escape.

It was, he said suavely, a perfect case of murder, with a motive, with adequate evidence of his commission of the act, and with proof of very suspicious subsequent actions.

He would prove, he declared, that Dr. Daniel Starbuck had with premeditation and with planning and with ruthlessness brought to an end the life of Miss Hannah Starbuck.

The first witness was the coroner of Greenfield County, who was called, in accordance with accepted legal procedure, merely to establish the fact that Miss Hannah Starbuck was dead, and that the corpus delicti which would be referred to throughout the trial was that of Miss Hannah Starbuck.

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This formality attended to, the State called as its first important witness Mr. Anderson Lamy. Mr. Lamy was a tall, crisp young man with alert blue eyes. He was, he said, an employee of the Federal Air Lines; that he was on the night shift, from 8 P.M. to 4 A.M., and that his duties were to sell airline tickets and to answer questions and render similar services.

UNDER Storm's gentle questioning, he admitted that he had been on duty at the Greenfield Municipal Airport on the night of May 25th, last. And he identified the girl sitting at the counsel table between Gillian Hazeltine and the defendant as the one he had served on that particular evening.

"Do you recall her name?" the district attorney asked.

"Yes, sir. Mary Brown. She said she wanted two tickets for Dallas on the 3 A.M. plane, the morning of May 28th."

"Are you quite sure, Mr. Lamy, that this is the young lady who told you her name was Mary Brown?"

Mark Storm went to Mrs. Starbuck's chair and placed his hands on the back of it.

"Yes, sir. That's her, all right."

"And you're sure she said Mary Brown—not Miss Carolyn Kelly?"

"Yes, sir. The tickets were made out for her and for Mr. George Brown."

Storm went to his end of the counsel table and picked up a pair of square green slips of paper. He said, "Do you identify these as ticket stubs which you tore from the tickets you sold to Miss Brown—or Miss Kelly—now Mrs. Starbuck?"

"Yes, sir. The name Miss Mary Brown is written on one stub, and Mr. George Brown on the other."

Mark Storm looked meaningly at the jury. He had somehow managed—cleverly—to convey that this bit of subterfuge on Carolyn Starbuck's part on the night of May 25th was fraught with the most sinister significance. Why, indeed, had this girl used an alias if she wasn't up to something dishonorable?

The State requested that the ticket stubs be admitted as Material Exhibit A for the State. His questioning of the witness was resumed.

"Did you do anything else for Mrs. Starbuck, or Miss Kelly—I mean Miss Brown—on that evening?"

"Yes, sir. I made reservations for her through to Mexico City on our line and the Pan-American."

"Did you notice anything special about her that aroused your curiosity?"

"Yes, sir. She seemed very agitated. When she had bought the tickets, I heard her say, 'Oh, my God!'—and she ran!"

"Do you know why she ran?"

"I believe so. A man with a scar on his forehead had just come in the door from the field. She saw this man, and then she ran."

"Will you look about this courtroom and see if you can identify this man you saw?"

The witness looked about the courtroom. He said, "That's the man." and pointed to a man in the front row of spectators.

"Dr. Tichman?" Storm asked.

"I don't know his name. But that's the man."

Storm excused the witness, and Gillian waived cross examination. He knew that Storm's purpose in introducing this testimony was to establish premeditation—to implant in the jury's collective mind that the defendant and co-defendant had planned the murder

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of Aunt Hannah and their getaway at least forty-eight hours in advance.

THE next witness called by the State was Nora Halliday, a nurse from the Hobart Creed Hospital —a plump, pretty young brunette with bright brown eyes and a birdlike manner.

She was nervous as she went to the stand and was sworn, and when she seated herself in the witness chair, Gillian saw that her lively eyes darted here and there and then steadied on the eyes of the man with the scar. Watching Dr. Tichman, Gillian saw the surgeon's eyes concentrating on the nurse, with little lines between them in the flesh above the nose, as if, holding the girl with those black, intense eyes, Dr. Tichman were actually trying to hold her under his control.

Glancing quickly back at the nurse, Gillian saw her eyes lose their lively sparkle and become dull and strange. Her breathless voice had changed, too, and become curiously dull and mechanical.

Mark Storm was gently questioning her. She said she was a floor nurse, and that her station was the third floor of the main operating building, and that she had been on duty on the eventful night of May 27th.

Storm: "Was one of your patients a Miss Hannah Starbuck?"

The witness: "Yes, sir."

"Tell us about your duties in connection with her."

"She was one of my patients."

"How long had you known her professionally?"

"About six months."

"Did you notice anything particular about her actions or behavior on the night in question?"

Miss Halliday was staring at Dr. Tichman, her eyes not moving from him. Gillian got up and stood so that he blocked that line of vision. But this blockade apparently made little difference. Either the Tichman brand of hypnotic influence worked regardless of optical barriers, or she was under his spell and would stay under it for some time.

"IN the course of my rounds when I first went on duty," the witness answered the district attorney's question, "I went in to see Miss Starbuck. I first looked at her chart, and saw that she had been restless and complaining all day. She had complained about pains in her head and heart."

Storm: "Had she ever complained about her heart before?"

"Yes, sir. She was under careful observation because of several attacks of angina pectoris she had had in the past few months. And she was also under observation—and treatment—for a serious anemic condition."

"Do you know what treatment was prescribed for this anemic condition?"

"Yes, sir. A dilute solution of arsenic, and various kinds of food containing iron — mostly liver and spinach."

"How often was this arsenic solution given to her?"

"Three times a day, after meals."

"Just how was this solution kept? And where was it kept?"

"It was kept in a bottle on a shelf. In Miss Starbuck's room."

"How large a bottle?"

"A pint."

"Can you tell the jury, Miss Halliday, just how much of this weak arsenic solution was in this bottle on the night of May 27th?"

"Yes, sir. It was full within an inch of the top."

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"Is angina pectoris a disease of the heart?"

"Yes, sir. It's a neuralgia of the heart."

"Did anything unusual occur on the evening of May 27th?"

"Yes, sir. The lively sparkle was not returning to Miss Halliday's eyes. She was staring steadfastly at a point on Gillian's chest, and if that invisible line were continued, it would reach the eyes of the man with the zigzag scar.

"At a little after nine thirty I went into Miss Starbuck's room and found her very low-spirited and complaining about a pain in her heart. She was in such distress that I sent another nurse to ask Dr. Starbuck to come."

"Was Dr. Starbuck the physician in charge of her case?"

"No, sir. Dr. Barnum was in charge of the case, but Dr. Starbuck was supervising. I mean, he took a very personal interest in the case."

"I should say," Storm said in his most ironical manner, "that he took a *very* personal interest in her case."

Gillian objected to this, and was sustained.

Storm now asked the witness if, when she sent for Dr. Starbuck, he had come.

"Not just then. Dr. Barnum came. By that time, Miss Starbuck's condition was rather acute. Dr. Barnum gave her a treatment. I think amyl nitrate. Miss Starbuck seemed to respond, and she seemed to rest more comfortably, so Dr. Barnum left. I think she was assisting Dr. Starbuck in an operation."

"Did you stay with Miss Starbuck?"

"For a few minutes. Then I went my rounds. But I looked in on her every few minutes. She was all right for a little less than half an hour, then she began to groan and toss about. So I called Dr. Barnum again. He came and looked at Miss Starbuck and told me to send at once for Dr. Starbuck—that his aunt's condition was alarming."

"What time was this?"

"About ten five. The chart shows the exact time."

"Did Dr. Starbuck come?"

"Yes, sir. Miss Starbuck was in great pain, writhing and groaning and making awful faces and clutching at her heart and throat."

"What did he say to you?"

"He told me to go about my duties."

THERE was an electrical quickening in the air of the courtroom.

"You mean to say," Storm said sharply, "Dr. Starbuck sent you out of the room?"

"Yes, sir."

"I see. He dismissed you. Did you go?"

"Yes, sir."

"When was this?"

"About ten fifteen."

"What was your next observation in connection with this case, Miss Halliday?"

"About ten thirty, or a little before, I went into Miss Starbuck's room."

"Was anyone there with the patient?"

"No, sir. I looked at her and thought she was asleep—that Dr. Starbuck had given her something to make her sleep. Then I looked closer and saw her eyes open and staring. I took her pulse and listened for her heart action. She was dead."

"What did you do?" Storm snapped.

"I called the amphitheater where Dr. Starbuck was about to operate. A nurse told me he was just scrubbing up for an operation, and I gave her the message. I called Dr. Evans, one

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of the house diagnosticians. Dr. Evans came and confirmed that Miss Starbuck was dead."

Mark Storm questioned the witness a little further, taking her back especially over that part of her testimony relating to Dr. Starbuck's sending her out of the room. He seemed to attach great importance to this, and he was, of course, anxious to establish in the jury's mind the obvious inference that Starbuck had sent her from the room to clear the decks for the murder he had been planning.

It was damaging testimony. Gillian asked the girl only a few questions, chiefly relating to Starbuck's attitude when he had come into the room.

DR. EVANS was the next witness. A typical general practitioner of the old school, his black suit looked rusty and shiny. He was a benevolent-appearing man of fifty-odd, with a clipped gray mustache and kindly eyes.

He testified that he had gone into Room 310 and examined the body of Hannah Starbuck, and found that she was dead. Consulting the chart, he found that Dr. Starbuck had administered caffein sodium benzoate.

Storm: "At what time did you enter Room 310?"

"About ten twenty-five."

"Didn't you write on the chart that she had died in an attack of angina pectoris?"

"Yes."

"Did you write that because of your observations of the body, or because you knew that caffein sodium benzoate is used in the treatment of angina pectoris?"

"It was my opinion, based on examination of the body, that she had died of angina pectoris."

Mark Storm walked toward Dr. Evans, and his air matched the kindliness of the diagnostician's.

"Doctor, please tell the jury just what the woman looked like in death."

"Her eyes were open and dilated. There was a slightly green tinge in the flesh about the mouth. The mouth was open and there were flecks of foam on the lower lip."

"Wasn't it your opinion that she had died in a convulsion?"

"Not at the time. The appearance in death of one who dies of arsenic might be similar to that of one who dies in an attack of angina. Angina pectoris is a strange and terrible, disease, Mr. Storm."

"Will you tell us a little about it, doctor?"

Dr. Evans gravely obliged. "The victim has paroxysms of great pain in the cardiac regions of the heart, generally extending into the left shoulder and arm and the left side of the neck. This is accompanied by a strong sense of impending death. The pain in the heart is of great intensity—of a cold and sickening nature. Most patients I have treated for angina cried out, in attacks, 'I am going to die!' It is a horrible disease."

"How would these symptoms compare to those of arsenic poisoning?"

"The patient suffers great pain generally, and goes off into convulsions, dying in convulsions."

"Quickly?"

"It would depend on the amount of the dose, and the constitution of the individual."

"When you learned that Miss Starbuck had actually died of arsenic poisoning, not of angina pectoris, were you surprised?"

Dr. Evans smiled sadly. "Nothing surprises me, Mr. Storm."

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Storm excused him. Gillian waived cross examination. The State called its next witness—Dr. Claudia Barnum. Tall, strikingly handsome in a severely simple blue dress, with her hair shining like burnished copper, the clever woman surgeon went to the stand. Her eyes were candid and gentle. She was, Gillian thought as she crossed the courtroom, typical of the clever, modern professional woman, and he wished that she were on his side. He did not, could not understand the antagonism he had sensed in her all along, although he was beginning to suspect its reason.

CHAPTER X.

ACCUSED!

WHEN she took the stand, her eyes went swiftly, as Nurse Halliday's had done, to the man with the scar who sat in the front row. Those black eyes seemed to burn across the courtroom into hers. And it seemed to Gillian that she suddenly lost most of her charming pink color and went pale, and that she wrenched her clear eyes from the hypnotic black ones of Dr. Tichman only with great effort.

Tichman was, Gillian reflected, a *Svengali* to a host of *Trilbys,* a sinister and dangerous individual he had proved to be.

It had been rumored that Dr. Barnum was the State's key witness, but although Gillian was familiar with most of the testimony she would utter, and was prepared for it, he was afraid he had not thought of everything. For that reason, and her own admission of ruthless selfishness, Gillian considered her the State's most dangerous witness.

And Storm's manner was confident. In his questioning, he was cheerful, almost blithe. And he managed to convey to the jury that he had the deepest, the utmost respect for this beautiful red-haired surgeon.

Before she had gone very far with her recital of the events of that momentous evening, Gillian was aware that she had fallen under Dr. Tichman's spell, that the lustre was gone from her handsome eyes, the sparkle from her intelligent voice. Her eyes were fastened on those of the young man with the scar.

Dr. Barnum picked up the testimony of Miss Halliday, and described how she had gone to Room 310, given Miss Starbuck amyl nitrate inhalations, to check an attack of angina pectoris, and had, finally, in despair, sent for Dr. Starbuck.

"At what time was this?"

"Ten ten," the witness answered in that colorless, mechanical voice, as she stared fixedly at Dr. Tichman.

Crisply, Storm said, "Tell the jury, doctor, just what happened."

"Dr. Starbuck came and sent Miss Halliday from the room. Then he sent me from the room."

"Why?" Storm snapped.

"He said he didn't require my help."

"Didn't he order you out of the room?" Storm cried.

"He told me to go," Claudia Barnum answered tonelessly.

"Did he say anything else?"

"He said he was going to give her caffein sodium benzoate."

"Did you see him give her this restorative?"

"No."

"What did you see? Tell the jury what you saw, doctor!"

There was a tenseness about her that aroused Gillian's suspicions. He

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stood up quietly and walked over to where he could get a better view of her pale face with its lacklustre eyes. He glanced at Tichman, and saw that sinister individual staring at her with his fists on his knees, his body inclined forward from the waist, his whole attitude one of intense concentration and purpose.

In a breathless hush, the witness answered the question.

"I went outside, but I did not go away. I was worried about Miss Starbuck, and puzzled by Dr. Starbuck's orders to Miss Halliday and me. Then I heard something smash in the room. It sounded like breaking glass. I think my hand was on the knob all this time, but I'm not sure. In any event, I turned the knob and looked in.

"Dr. Starbuck was bending over his aunt, holding up her head with one hand, pouring something—a colorless liquid—into her mouth from a tall glass with the other. She seemed to be drinking with difficulty. Then—then I saw that the bottle of arsenic solution was missing from its shelf. I looked on the floor and saw the broken fragments of it under the washstand."

GILLIAN had thrust his hands deep into his pants pockets. He was studying the beautiful surgeon's face with the most curious interest, for this was new. This was a surprise—a wicked surprise. He wondered if she knew what she was saying. Words came sliding off her lips, each one as if clipped; and she was staring, with a strange helplessness, or so it looked, across the room and into the black, compelling eyes of the hypnotic Tichman.

Storm said impatiently, "Go on, go on, doctor!"

She licked her lips. "That's all I saw."

"Wait a minute!" Storm cried. "Was the floor where the bottle had fallen and broken wet, or was it dry?"

"It was dry."

Gillian heard Carolyn Starbuck whisper hotly: "It's a lie!"

The beautiful woman on the stand evidently heard her, for she repeated: "It was dry."

"Just a moment, doctor," Storm said. "You say that this bottle you saw broken was the arsenic bottle from the shelf above the washstand?"

"Yes"—a whisper.

"Were you well acquainted with that bottle?"

"Yes. I was the physician in charge of Miss Starbuck's case—acting under Dr. Starbuck's orders. He had ordered a weak arsenic solution for his aunt's anemia. It was this bottle—a pint bottle—that was missing from the shelf and lying in fragments on the floor."

Gillian had removed his hands from his pockets and was rubbing them nervously together. He had anticipated none of this. It made the case against his client utterly airtight.

Dr. Barnum was saying, in substance, that she had looked into that room and seen Dr. Starbuck pouring a pint of arsenic solution into his aunt's mouth!

According to Starbuck's own recital of the facts to Gillian, he had sent Miss Halliday away simply because she was busy and was not needed. "I wouldn't have sent Dr. Barnum out," he had said, "except that my aunt seemed to be trying to tell me something and I gathered that she wanted me alone with her. When Dr. Barnum had gone out I gave Aunt Hannah an injection of caffein sodium benzoate. She

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seemed to be reacting favorably. I was scheduled to operate in F. So when she started to come out of it I went out. Dr. Barnum was still there in the corridor. She said she'd wait there until the floor nurse came, so I left."

But it was a vastly different story that the beautiful Dr. Barnum was telling to the jury!

"Later," she was saying, "I went back there and examined that broken glass, and the floor. It had not been wet."

"Did you presume that the bottle when it fell—"

"Presumption isn't evidence," Gillian snapped.

"I merely wish to establish—"

"Rephrase your question," Judge Phelan ordered.

"You were saying," Storm suavely tried again, "that you went into the room later and found that the floor, all about where the bottle had fallen, was quite dry?"

"Yes, Mr. Storm."

STORM now repeated and rephrased various of these questions, to establish in the jury's mind that, although the bottle of arsenic solution was empty when it fell to the floor, Dr. Starbuck had poured a large glassful of some liquid down his aunt's throat.

"When I talked to you on the morning following Miss Starbuck's death, why didn't you tell me about that broken bottle on the floor, Dr. Barnum?"

"It didn't occur to me as important, Mr. Storm. The incident puzzled me, but I attached no importance to it until Miss Starbuck's body was exhumed and her stomach was found to contain so much arsenic."

"Have you ever done any post mortem work?"

"I did nothing else for one year."

"Have you ever, in the course of your post mortem work, or your autopsies, examined the stomachs of corpses who had, in life, systematically taken arsenic for some such ailment as anemia?"

"Yes. A number of such corpses."

"Does the arsenic accumulate in the stomach?"

"No. It is distributed about the body. Arsenic assimilates rather rapidly into the blood."

"Then would you say emphatically that if a great quantity of arsenic were found in the contents of Miss Starbuck's stomach, it would indicate that it was not an accumulation of the small regular doses she was taking?"

"Most emphatically!"

"If an amount of arsenic totaling, let us say, six grains, were found in her stomach, would you say that that amount of this poison would have been enough to kill her?"

"I should say so."

"But I should think, doctor, that if this patient had been taking small amounts of arsenic regularly, in doses three times daily, she would have developed an immunity to the poison."

"Not at all. She might have a greater tolerance for arsenic than a person who had not been accustomed to the poison in small, regular doses, but her tolerance might not have been sufficient to accommodate such a large amount. In short, she would have died."

"Having been the doctor in charge of Miss Starbuck's case, and being very familiar with her physical state generally, would you say that six grains of arsenic would have been fatal?"

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"I would, indeed!"

"That will be all. Your witness, Mr. Hazeltine." And the district attorney gave Gillian his courtliest bow, his most urbane smile.

As Gillian strolled toward the witness, a corridor door opened and a court attendant came down the aisle and spoke to Dr. Tichman. His husky whisper clearly said, "You're wanted urgently on the telephone, doctor."

With a frown, Dr. Tichman got up and followed the attendant out of the courtroom. Gillian waited until the man with the scar was gone. And it seemed to him that the witness watched his departure with doubt or misgivings.

GILLIAN had gone to some pains arrange for that telephone call. He had simply wanted Tichman out of the courtroom while he cross examined the red-headed surgeon. He wanted the girl free from that hypnotic influence.

He deliberately busied himself at his table, glancing at this paper and that, to give Dr. Barnum's mind a chance to be freed of the compelling power of the man with the scar. And when he believed that the time was ripe, he turned about and gently began to question her.

Her clear, candid eyes met his steel-blue ones, and she answered his questions quickly, thoughtfully, fully. He attempted to break her down, to make her deny her recent sensational statements. But the red-headed surgeon would not be broken down. She remained calm, poised—and clever. She crisply reiterated the story she had related under Storm's examination.

He was just finishing with her when Dr. Tichman, looking coldly furious, returned to his seat.

"That's all," Gillian said wearily. And he presumed that Mark Storm would now drive the final rivets into his case.

Gillian would have given a great deal to know just who had actually poisoned Hannah Starbuck. Dr. Barnum had had the opportunity—and Gillian strongly suspected her. But there were so many others to suspect, too.

Dr. Barnum's testimony was not that of an eye witness to a poisoning. It presented, rather, a chain of circumstantial evidence of the most damning nature—the pint bottle of arsenic solution, the glass of a "colorless liquid" which she claimed she had seen Dr. Starbuck pouring into his aunt's mouth—and the empty bottle, broken, on the floor near the washstand.

What conclusion could be reached but that Dr. Starbuck had poured the contents of the bottle into a "very large glass," smashed the bottle in an attempt to destroy evidence, and then made his aunt drink the arsenic?

Yet, despite its damning nature, it left Gillian a loophole—an opportunity, later, to devise one of the most daring and dangerous tricks he had ever used in a career of clever trickery.

The State's next witness was a nurse who had removed the bedding from Room 310, after Hannah Starbuck's death, and done the preliminary straightening up until the room should be thoroughly cleaned the next day. She had, she said, found a smashed bottle on the floor near the washstand and had removed the pieces. She had no other testimony to offer. Gillian, recollecting the particles of glass he had found on the floor of 310, waived cross examination.

Court was recessed for luncheon.

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Under cover of the hum of conversation as the spectators arose, Gillian said to Dan Starbuck, "How about this smashed bottle?"

The haggard young surgeon said quietly, "As far as I know, that bottle was on the shelf, intact, while I was in the room."

But Gillian had himself found particles of glass in the room. Who, he wondered, had smashed that bottle?

THE first witness of the afternoon session was Nancy Green, her platinum blondness strikingly set off by a smart suit of a burnt orange color, her shapely ankles displayed in sheer chiffon.

She was so striking that the courtroom gasped as she arose and walked to the stand. Here again was unshakable poise—and here was one more *Trilby* to Dr. Tichman's amazing *Svengali.*

In a limpid voice she answered the rapid fire of questions put to her by the suave, poised district attorney.

"How long have you been in the employ of Dr. Creed?"

"Two years and five months."

"What are your duties in the Hobart Creed Hospital?"

"I am a nurse."

She was staring fixedly at Dr. Tichman, and her voice and expression had, like those of the two girls who had preceded her to the stand, swiftly become dull and lifeless and mechanical.

"Were you well acquainted with Dr. Starbuck?"

"Yes. I knew him very well."

"Did you ever see him take a drink of liquor?"

"Oh, yes. Many's the time." The witness was smiling faintly, maliciously. "He carried it on his hip—a pint flask."

"Did you ever see him take cocaine?"

"Often."

"Tell the jury what you saw."

But the dazzling blonde did not glance at the jury. With that faint smile of malice she stared into the hot black eyes of the man with the scar.

"He would dump a pill into his hand and then pulverize it between a thumb and finger. Then he placed it here—in the crotch formed by his thumb and forefinger, and sniffed it."

"Was he aware that you saw him taking the drug?"

"I don't think he minded in the least. He used to joke about it."

"How do you know it was cocaine?"

"Oh, he told me it was. He tried to make me take some."

"Did you?"

"Of course not!"

"Have you ever seen him so badly under the influence of alcohol or this narcotic that he menaced the lives entrusted to him?"

"Yes, sir," the witness said clearly. "I saw him kill a man."

There was an excited outburst of murmurs. A bailiff silenced the uproar with a gavel.

Gillian was on his feet, objecting. He knew she was referring to that hemophiliac. And when Judge Phelan deferred a ruling until further evidence was taken, Gillian took exception.

Storm went on, "You say you saw him kill a man?"

"Yes, sir."

"Who was this man?"

"Norman Henderson. He was brought to the Hobart Creed Hospital for observation. He had a chronic appendix."

Gillian objected again, on the

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grounds that this entire line of testimony was not related to the charge on which Daniel Starbuck was under indictment.

Storm suavely declared that he was introducing it as a character evidence. He said, "Your Honor, have I not the right to attempt to impeach the character of the accused?"

The Court: "I prefer to defer ruling. Go on with this examination."

Gillian saw a look almost of joy in Nancy Green's eyes as she met those of Dr. Tichman. He barked, "Your Honor, I request that a juror be removed." In other words—that it be called a mistrial.

The judge refused. He then decided to admit the entire testimony relating to the man called Norman Henderson, on the grounds that it was character testimony.

THE blond girl went on:

"Dr. Starbuck was so drunk he hardly knew what he was doing. He was often that way, but of course like most clever, drinking surgeons, the moment he walked into the operating room he was as steady as the rock of Gibraltar."

"Tell us just what happened in the case of Norman Henderson."

"The laboratory technician took a blood test and found he was a bleeder."

"How did he take this blood test?"

"By pricking the end of the patient's finger."

"Didn't the patient bleed?"

"Yes, Mr. Storm. But he was given an injection which stopped the bleeding. At a consultation, it had been decided that Mr. Henderson should have his appendix removed. But then the blood test was taken, proving he was a bleeder, and a report was sent to Dr. Starbuck's office.

"I was in the office when he came in and picked up the report from his desk. He was so drunk he could hardly see the report. At least, he didn't read it at all. He just laughed and said, 'Send the sucker to B, and we'll yank that appendix out in a hurry.'"

"What happened?"

"He operated—and the patient died on the table of hemorrhage."

Gillian angrily insisted that this whole line of testimony be held inadmissible as evidence, on the grounds that it related to a charge already pending against the accused.

"Overruled!"

Storm: "Miss Green, do you recall showing me to Dr. Starbuck's room in the hospital on the morning following his—elopement to Mexico?"

"Yes, sir."

"Will you tell the jury what we saw under Dr. Starbuck's bed?"

"An accumulation of dozens and dozens of empty gin, bourbon and cocaine bottles."

Mark Storm waved a hand negligently toward Gillian. "Your witness, Mr. Hazeltine!"

Gillian faced the beautiful blond nurse with a feeling of dislike which he had had for few women. He knew that this girl was anxious—more than anxious—to see Dan Starbuck go to the electric chair. She had been desperately in love with Dr. Starbuck, he knew. He had caught the look of hopeless forlornness with which she had gazed at the young surgeon the night she had seen the "ghost." But since then Dr. Starbuck had married Carolyn Kelly. And Nancy Green was now that most treacherous and dangerous of all women—a woman scorned.

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK.

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MEN OF DARING
by STOOKIE ALLEN
AIRCRAFT WIZARD
Glenn Martin, famed maker of bomber planes, was not the first man to fly a heavier-than-air machine, though he made a successful flight soon after that of the celebrated Wright brothers. But as an aviator and plane inventor of rare skill and daring, he has attained more firsts" in the progress of aviation than any other man.
Glenn L. MARTIN
BORN IN MACKSBURG, IOWA, JANUARY 17, 1886, GLENN SPENT HIS BOYHOOD IN LIBERAL AND SALINA, KANSAS, WHERE HE INDULGED AN EARLY FLAIR FOR THINGS MECHANICAL. TAKING MACHINERY APART—ANYTHING FROM A BICYCLE TO A THRESHER — WAS HIS FAVORITE OCCUPATION. HE READ ABOUT CHANUTE'S PIONEER GLIDER AND LANGLEY'S FLYING MACHINE, THEN HE BEGAN MAKING AND FLYING BOX KITES.
GLENN TOOK NATURALLY TO GLIDING. HOWEVER THIS WAS QUITE DIFFICULT IN KANSAS WHERE HILLS ARE FEW AND FAR BETWEEN. THEN THE FAMILY MOVED TO CALIFORNIA. WITH HIS MOTHER'S ENTHUSIASTIC HELP, HE SPENT HIS NIGHTS BUILDING HIS FIRST AIRPLANE. HE HAD HEARD ABOUT THE FLIGHT OF THE WRIGHT BROTHERS. IF THEY COULD FLY, HE SAID, HE COULD TOO—AND ONE DAY, IN 1900, HE DID!
FROM THAT TIME ON, MAKING AND FLYING PLANES BECAME HIS LIFE WORK. IT WAS A PRECARIOUS BUSINESS, BUT MARTIN STUCK TO IT DOGGEDLY. HE WAS THE FIRST AVIATOR TO DELIVER MERCHANDISE BY AIR AND THE FIRST TO TAKE HIS MOTHER ALOFT!

A True Story in Pictures Every Week

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MARTIN WON ONE OF THE FIRST LICENSES OF THE FRENCH FEDERATION AERONAUTIQUE INTERNATIONALE; HE WAS THE FIRST TO DO AERIAL POLICE WORK; FIRST TO TAKE MOVIES IN THE AIR; FIRST IN THE CHICAGO INTERNATIONAL AIR DERBY. — HIS BUILDING OF BOMBING PLANES FOR THE U.S. GOVERNMENT IS A STORY IN ITSELF.
The Famous Martin Bomber
BEFORE THAT MARTIN HAD WRITTEN HIS NAME LARGE IN THE SAGA OF FLYING. IN 1912, HE FLEW FROM CALIFORNIA TO CATALINA ISLAND, THE RISKIEST OVER-WATER FLIGHT MADE UP TO THAT TIME. IN 1933 HE WAS AWARDED THE COLLIER TROPHY, THE BIGGEST AERONAUTICAL PRIZE.
MARTIN SUSTAINED MANY FLYING INJURIES. IN HIS EARLY DAYS A CRASH AT SAN DIEGO SENT HIM TO THE HOSPITAL, SERIOUSLY HURT. A NURSE CONFIDED TO HIS MOTHER THAT SHE COULD FIND COMFORT IN ONE THING, HER POOR BOY WOULD NEVER FLY AGAIN. "I'M SURE HE WILL THE MINUTE HE GETS OUT OF HERE," SAID MRS. MARTIN. AND HE DID!

Next Week: Lieut. Ormer Locklear, Airplane Acrobat

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The terrific struggle of gorilla versus lion was no sooner over than a more savage battle royal began

Their snarling and clawing was furious

First Loyalty

By ANTHONY RUD

A WHOLE dry month had passed. The Gaboon jungle had withered and turned yellow overhead, though in its murky fastnesses of green gloom and fungus growths below, little had changed. It seemed dank and changeless; but that was before the punitive expedition of white men came up the river.

A lazy black *tombo* had taken a large advance in trade goods for his village. Then he had forgotten his contract to furnish so and so much palm oil. The white traders could not find him, so they burned the huts of his village.

If it had stopped there, no one would have worried much. The black chieftain least of all. It had been time to move to another location anyhow.

Fire from the thatched huts soared aloft, and crackled into a roar like that of many snare-drums, however. The great drying crown of the forest had caught! It spread, driven south and west by a wind unknown on the floor of the jungle.

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Even though rains came then, the fire burned. And seven weeks later a gloomy black giant who had dwelt all his thirty-odd years of life within a dozen miles of the spot where Stanley found the explorer, Dr. Livingstone, pushed his way out of the thorn scrub and came slowly, cautiously down to the bank of a river strange to him, a Congo tributary which Belgian map-makers name the Ikatta.

He was a huge creature, this black-haired giant, even when he walked on his feet and the knuckles of his hands. In that posture he was three feet high, but so bulky and muscled of torso he could have occupied the space given to both guard and tackle in a close-line formation of human football.

The jungle was overpopulated. All sorts of animals made homeless by the great fire, had crowded down toward water. The old man of the woods was in a grouchy temper, but cautious for the sake of the big family which followed him.

Now, just before he reached the marshy bank of the stream, a movement in the scrub caused him to stop, raising himself from the knuckles of his hands to an erect posture.

Tremendous! Though only a few inches above five feet in height, the old man gorilla was a full yard across chest and shoulders..

His long, bunch-muscled arms reached on from there, giving him a sidewise stretch of almost seven feet!

He looked uncannily like a man—but a terrible, prehistoric sort of man. This was his defensive attitude. Up on his hind legs, he was ready to batter or embrace any enemy who dared his wrath. The black lips curled away in a savage snarl, revealing the awesome, overdeveloped dog teeth. Once clutched in his arms, no animal short of an elephant had any chance to save himself from those teeth.

This was not an enemy, this new arrival who came so incautiously toward water. It was only a short-necked giraffe, that rare and beautifully-colored creature which men call the okapi—and which they have tried in vain to capture and keep in their zoölogical gardens.

One sight of the enormous gorilla, and the little okapi uttered a squeak of terror, digging in its tiny hoofs to the ankles, then whirling to flee.

The gorilla felt ugly. He flashed forth one arm, to catch and destroy. But his long fingers only grazed the okapi, which went from there to hide and shiver for an hour.

The snarl which accompanied that vain grab at the sunset-hued okapi, died away into growls and muttered words in ape language. A moment passed in which the old fellow gazed upstream and down. Then he turned his great head, thrusting out the heavy, prognathous lower jaw, and emitted a roar in a different key.

It was a signal to the gorilla clan. The bush became alive. Out came mothers with babies on their backs. Small children already on their own, but subject to constant discipline of the strictest sort for disobedience.

Bucks of all ages up to that of the clan leader. Young females. Gray-haired oldsters of both sexes.

Of the males, most were the sons, grandsons and great-grandsons of the old leader, though three or four had been free-lance wanderers, separated from their own clan by some mischance, and attaching themselves to this old man's protection. (After meekly submitting to a thorough drubbing at his hands and teeth!) They had mated with the younger females, who were regarded as so much rubbish by the old man.

All the apes were weary and uneasy. They hated travel, other than their ordinary feeding round of two miles a day or thereabouts. And the heavy taint of smoke, borne downwind from the jungle fire far behind, mingled with the scent of hundreds of creatures they scarcely knew by sight. Ordinary times, the gorilla finds himself alone. Other animals shun the small sector which he makes his own, though it is only in starvation times that he will eat meat of any kind.

Now the whole troop came down to the

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marshy bank and drank awkwardly. Two of the babies fell in, were fished out—and spanked in exactly the fashion human children are spanked. They yowled lustily. Then each forgot the pain and stopped abruptly, scurrying around to forage for berries while the elders were engaged upon building nests of boughs for the night to come.

The great leader did none of the camp-making. His work seemed done, so he hid away a few yards into the brush and sat down for a good scratch and to curry out the thorns and burrs which had caught in his shaggy hair.

Now and then he barked out gruff reminders; and females came rather sulkily, the elder ones grumbling openly. They left offerings of berries and choice strips of inner bark, which he snatched up and ate as his due. Was he not guide and protector—as well as ancestor—of the clan?

Ape children are pests. They resemble the heedless, inquisitive smaller monks, the fellows who hang by their tails and hurl coconuts, much more than do gorilla adults. The old ones, male and female, have a solid place in the jungle world, and dignity to protect. But urchins have no dignity; nothing but insatiable curiosity—backed by something like unthinking cruelty.

Deep in this most impenetrable thicket a spent lioness had crawled. Heavy with young, she and her mate had fled the fire, until she could go no further. Then, true to the instincts of all big cats, she had sent her lord and husband on his way. He could not assist—and she deeply distrusted his appetite, where tiny cubs would be concerned.

The male, a big buff-yellow maneless lion who looked more like a tiger than most lions do, had not gone far. Instinct kept him from traveling further along the course of their journey. The great jungle fire prevented him from doing the usual thing; returning to his accustomed stamping grounds.

He lay in covert less than a quarter-mile distant, occasionally lashing his tufted tail back and forth like a heavy whip, as the ape-sounds came to him. He did not like apes, but ordinarily he did not see or hear them. In his own domain the lion was even more of an absolute ruler than the old man gorilla in his small circle of jungle. This five-year-old male, in the prime of his strength, measured a full eleven feet from nose to root of tail. He was proud; and the only creature of land, sea or sky who could get any sort of obedience from him was his own mate. Even she had to walk in his lordly shadow, any time except when she was with cubs.

It was just then that one of the nameless ape urchins, no doubt still loved in a certain fashion by his own gorilla mother, but otherwise just an ugly little devil, crawled under and through the prickly bush—and discovered what he thought to be a dead lioness lying there.

One horrified yowl, when he discovered his mistake, and then he was knocked head over heels back into the scrub. He was badly dazed, but crawled away. The sick lioness coughed and roared and made a terrific rumpus about it. She was telling the heart of Africa that this was one time she meant to be *alone!*

Away there in his covert the male lion heard. Probably he thought it all out in the second his tail took to flash back and forth, for he was away in a leap. Just as though he had been lying on a great catapult which suddenly loosed. His first spring took him fifteen feet, the second one twenty; and then he went on as a yellow flash, eating up that quarter mile of distance in something like thirty seconds, despite the brush and trees and bad footing. As he came he roared encouragement.

The baby ape had recovered enough to bawl and blubber as he hippity-hopped back toward camp. He was just in time to attract the attention of the great male lion, who burst from the bush, bounded twice, then vented a coughing snarl as he batted the baby ape with his formidable paw.

This blow crushed the little one's skull, driving out all curiosity and impishness forever. But even the avenging lion forgot

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all about the incident in the space of a split second. Out from the brush ambled an ungainly old man gorilla—ten times the size of the dead baby, and a thousand times more formidable!

That wa sall the lion saw, but there was much more. From bush and rock, each one snarling and beating his shaggy chest with his great hands, came five, eight, a dozen more male gorillas, closing in on the tawny intruder and getting in a frame of mind to tear him to fragments! Behind their men came the females, screaming rage, and egging on the men to vengeance!

The younger males, however, knew this was the business of the leader. They waited. He faced the lion, rising to his hind legs, and roaring out defiance and a promise of vengeance as he beat a tattoo on his great bass drum of a chest.

THE long yellow beast swerved, saw and charged—all in the space of time it takes a barnyard swallow to change the direction of flight.

Head hunched between his great shoulders, the gorilla stepped forward, arms extended, to seize the enemy in midleap!

The lion's right paw smote sidewise and down, striking with a force sufficient to slay a hartebeeste or a springbok. But this was a tougher quarry. Some hair and some blood came away in the lion's claws, but the gorilla did not even stagger or flinch. Borne backward by the sheer impetus of the lion's body, he still managed to seize the lion exactly where he had planned to seize him—around his shoulders with one great arm, over the other shoulder with the other arm.

Thus as they went to the ground, rolling over and over as roars, coughs, growls and sounds of snapping teeth and worry came from the cloud of dust and débris they raised, the old man gorilla got his own breast and shoulders against the breast of the lion! There they were out of the way of the slashing forepaws!

The ape, heedless of the thrashing, the rolling over and over, heedless of the great back paws of the lion which were ripping into his own entrails, burrowed into the clinch for all the world like a human boxer in the ring, protecting his own chin by sinking it into the hollow of an opponent's shoulder.

But the gorilla was doing much more than clinch. He was straining the lion's back, almost breaking it. And beside this, the great canine teeth were biting, crunching into the yellow skin, the reddening flesh, and the spurting crimson of the lion's throat!

Such a fight of jungle titans is decided in a space of mere seconds. The destruction is too terrible to allow it to last any longer. As the ring of watching gorillas closed in tighter and tighter, the struggling figures on the ground ceased rolling. The spasmodic movements of the lion's hind legs slowed, stopped. The great puddle of red which surrounded the combatants, widened. The lion quivered, what of him could be seen. The black-red gorilla had not appeared to move for some little time.

But now he pushed himself away, and fell as he tried to haul himself erect. From breastbone downward he was a visual horror, a thing which manifestly could not live. It seemed a miracle indeed that he had held on to life long enough to realize even the fact that he had emerged from this fight for his offspring, a victor!

Realize the fact he surely did, however! Pushing himself up a little on the knuckles of one hand, he beat his stained breast twice or thrice with the palm of the other, and uttered a feeble ghost of his old-time roar. Then he slumped, and lay silent, his deep-set, cruel eyes slowly glazing in death.

The females set up a screeching, a requiem which made the timid of the jungle cower for miles around.

But the males did not mourn. Even while this great combat was in progress, they had started to show their teeth to each other. Now five of the larger and more belligerent had begun a savage battle royal among themselves. The king was dead.

Who would be king?

THE END

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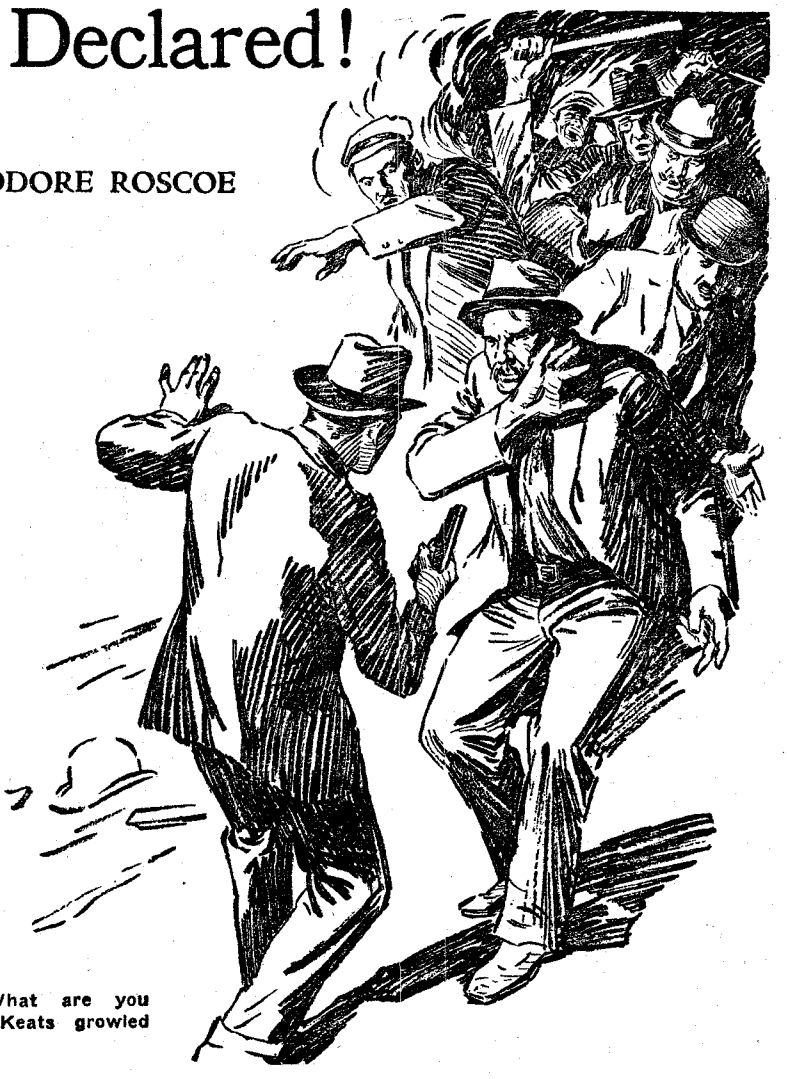
War Declared!

By THEODORE ROSCOE



"Come on! What are you waiting for?" Keats growled

A devil's brew simmers on the European continent as John Keats, the American, tries to find the hand that is stirring it

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

EUROPE had been a tinder box for many months when those fateful shots were fired on a July evening in 1936, taking the lives of Victor Gatreau, Foreign Minister of Esperance, and Baron Von Speer, Premier of Teutony. The two diplomats had met in the Hotel Metropole, in the Teutonic capital, for a secret conference. All Europe awaited word of that conference.

This story began in the Argosy for April 27

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Next to the conference room was a room assigned to the press. Among the leading journalists who were covering the important event were John Keats, the American who represented Universe News; Anton Stehli, the Swiss; Alexandra Frantsovna, the Russian girl; Kurt Nielsen, the Scandinavian; Philip Shepler, the young Englishman; Paul Emmerich, the Teuton reporter, and Raoul Dubail, of Esperance.

Before going to the conference, John Keats had made a flying trip to interview Count Vasil Garganoff of Transylvania, the munitions king of Europe, who had offered Keats a huge sum if the latter would cease probing into the activities of the munitions makers. Keats had refused, and an attempt had been made to kill him.

Then came the explosion in the Teuton capital. When servants entered the conference room where the two great men had been dining and talking, they found them both dead, after what had apparently been a duel. The Teuton police announced that evidence showed that Gatreau had fired first, and that Von Speer had only attempted to defend himself.

War clouds began to gather. Paul Emmerich learned that he had been appointed a major in the army. Esperance and Teutony both began mobilization. Keats, investigating, found empty cartridge cases in the press room, beneath the transom connecting it with the conference room. Before he could take this information to the police, he was shot down outside the hotel.

The bullet only grazed his scalp. When he rushed back into the hotel to corner the would-be assassin, he struggled with the unknown marksman in the darkened press room, but the latter escaped. Kicking open the bathroom door, Keats found Shepler dying on the floor.

CHAPTER V (*Continued*).

DANGER OF WAR!

ONE would expect the fellow to quit playing possum, to scramble upright and start the shooting. But Philip Shepler refused to move. When Keats pounced into the bathroom to turn the body over with sick hands, the curly boyish head lolled as if broken at the neck. The arms flopped. John Keats found his fingers smeared vermilion. He stared in an agony of disbelief at the three raw bullet-holes punched in a row across Shepler's ribs. The silk gym shirt was cherry-color.

Keats wet a towel at the tub, bathed the gray forehead.

"Shepler!"

Eyelids fluttered in the pinched, unyouthful face. "I'm—hurt—"

"Who did it? *When?*"

"Don't know—" The young Englishman's eyes were glassy. "I—came back from—newspaper office—going to shave—" His lips struggled on the whisper. "Walked into bathroom—bedroom light went—out—"

"Who was in the bedroom, Shepler? Who turned it out?"

"Didn't—see anybody. Lights just—went. I turned around—saw gun flash. Flame—in dark. Hurt my—chest—"

Keats gasped.

"For God's sake hang on!" The lad's face was hollowed in the cheeks, lead-color, dropping perspiration. Keats was gentle with the towel. "Stick with it, kid. Can you hear me? I'll get a doctor right away—" He groaned at the futility of trying to stem blood on the riddled gym shirt. "We'll get him for you, kid! Whoever did this—quick, tell me! Were you on that roof across the court tonight? The next building?"

"Yeh—roof—" the lad was panting. "I wanted — buy handkerchiefs for—my girl. Going past building—thought I saw woman—running—side alley. I—followed—up fire escape in back—think it was—Frantsovna—"

"*Frantsovna!*" Keats echoed hoarsely. "You saw her?"

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"Not sure—but thought maybe—she was after news—peek into hotel or something. I follow—but soldier in hotel courtyard—call me down—" In spasmodic strength, young Shepler gripped Keats' arm. "Please," he panted. "Don't leave me. Don't—go away—"

Keats had been striving to fasten a bandage across the punctured ribs; but he heard the whisper trail off into silence, and when the fingers fell from his sleeve, he saw young Shepler was dead.

KEATS wondered if, somehow, he had shot the lad himself. No, his Colt had not been fired. The kid had been dying in the bathroom while he struggled with that unseen knifer in the dark. Anger flamed. He had scarcely known this youngster, but the lad's murder was a cruelty beyond reprisal. Shot down in cold blood like this. Shut in here to die. Keats found himself rinsing his hands at the washstand, his eyes filmed. Emmerich must have done this job. The *Tageblatt* reporter. He'd followed Shepler into the bedroom, murdered him ruthlessly.

So much was clear, the events of a nightmare, actions without logical motivation. But the enemy he'd battled in the dark, the creature who had faded like a banshee at the snap of the light-switch? This bathroom made the only possible retreat, and Shepler had been in here alone. Maddened by the impossible, Keats sprang out into the bedroom for another search. He flung himself at the dining room door. Locked on the dead. The hall door, too, remained fastened. Windows down and locked. Beds empty above and under. Satchels and kitbags where he'd kicked at them. He pressed his forehead with a fist. Shepler dying in the bathroom. Somebody in here, waiting in the dark with this Russian knife. Somebody who had to be here now, and wasn't.

His knees wanted to shake as he pulled shut and locked the bathroom door. No doctors could help the lad in there now. The case wanted a Houdini. He jabbed the key into his slashed vest and paced the floor, searching walls, ceiling, furniture, with frightened eyes. What should he do? Houdini wouldn't come. Instead, they would send Homicide Squad Number 1, Commission 17K on Ballistics, Chief of Police Von Guhle with a scientific brain unlikely to accept a ghost story. Police already frenzied by the furies that had been turned loose in the next room.

One thing he knew. He must get out of this wizardish bedroom. He had to get to the Alexanderplatz, and his news story to Universe wasn't telegraphed. Hadn't he started for police headquarters once that night with a collection of .38 shells and a monogrammed cufflink in his pocket? Those shells! His fingers flew into his vest. His mouth hung open as he dug from one pocket to another. They'd been there when he'd raced from the hotel; when he took that clip on the head. He tore at the starched cloth. They weren't there now. Shells, cufflink had disappeared.

In heightened confusion, he recalled the words of the soldier in the court. "The little boy found you before I did, and ran to summon an ambulance—"

KEATS unlocked the hall door, slapped it shut behind him, and wasted no time in making for the mezzanine. The lobby below was livid with a continuous, babbling roar.

He found the sentry at the suite door

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leaning on his rifle and calmly chewing the tips of his yellow mustache. He had not expected to find the sentry calmly chewing. He shouted because it released his feelings and he had to be heard.

"Did anyone come out of that bedroom? Since I went in there?"

The sentry squinted. "No, *mein herr.* Nobody came out."

People were behaving like maniacs at the foot of the staircase, gesturing and bellowing, cheering, pushing, snapping their fingers, saluting; but they saw the eyes under his hatbrim, the jut of his scarred jaw, and stepped out of his way. Something had happened to these brewers, these goose-footed officers, but he had no time for questions about it. "Schnitzler!" a mouth bawled into his ear. "*Der Meister* is coming to the capital!" He nodded as if it meant something. Rotating through the whirl, caroming between a gilt sofa and a fat army officer, he barged for the terrace doors. Outside he was surprised to find the night clean-washed, airy after the downpour.

There was his man. The apple-cheeked Reichswehr soldier peering out of the side court. Shadowy against the wall where Keats had fallen. He shouted; and the soldier came at him menacingly.

"That is you, *ja?* My station is by the courtyard or I would have chased you for a clubbing. You dare strike a soldier of the—"

"Hold it!" Keats snarled. He displayed his press card.

Confronted by a seal of authority, the guard was obsequious.

"I did not know, *mein herr*—"

Keats was stern.

"Never mind that! What became of the little boy you said found me against the wall?"

"The child, *ja?* But he ran off in terror to call an ambulance. He was leaning over you in the rain, trying to hoist you by an arm, the little fellow." The trooper pointed up the terrace. "Did he not run into the hotel?"

"Where did he come from? Who was he with?"

"Why, he said he was walking behind you when you reeled—"

"For God's sake," Keats shook out, "what did he look like? You are certain it was a child?"

An emphatic head-nodding.

"But a little one," the soldier stammered, "no bigger than six years old, I should say, and wearing a white sailor suit. I could not see him well for the downpour, but his hair was yellow in the rain—"

Keats interrupted with fury, "We have got to find that child, you understand? Somebody had him trailing me. I've been robbed!"

The soldier's face paled, fatuous in alarm. "*Himmel!* He was going through your pockets? But he gave me your name, *mein herr,* the same as on your press card. I thought you were his father. He said he was your son!"

"My son!" Keats echoed this lunacy with jaws unhinged. The Russian knife in his coat was not enough. His alibi needed the evidence of those .38 shells and that cufflink. What fiendish plot had flung a six-year-old child into this screeching jabberwok of hiding murder and death? A kid, tutored by someone to trail and rob him, to claim his body in that alley under pretense of being his son! Had Emmerich ever mentioned a little boy? Frantsovna?

"You wish I should enter the hotel with you?" the soldier was mumbling.

Keats stared at that haunted upper window. What were police doing in

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that drawing room with a red lantern? If they visited the bedroom— That wasn't a red lantern, either. The window filled with the glow. The light grew. Now the soldier was staring. Another window caught the reflection. The glass was scarlet. There was a faint, blanketed *thump* as if an engine somewhere inside the hotel had burst. One of the window panes tinkled and came down to the terrace in a bright shower. A subtle pungence invaded the wind. Doors broke open on the terrace, spilling men.

"Fire!"

Far up the plaza the sirens were wailing again.

JUST how he managed to force a path through the boiling current of the mob, John Keats could never remember. Crown hysteria had Roman-candled to insanity. The hotel lobby was a madhouse. Bodies eddied and whirled around him, clawing at his coat, beating at him, hollering. Men twisted together, fell. "Fire!"—"It is a plot!"—"Somebody threw a bomb!"—"The hotel is burning!"—"Stay out of here!" A policeman's billy whizzed past his nose. "Here, you, get back!" He lowered a shoulder and drove himself through to the lobby desk, off-tackle.

Smoke was coiling and winding through the upper air; hot, brown festoons swirling, dissolving, thickening, clinging to chandeliers, weaving in pools against the frescoed ceiling. On the mezzanine, bellboys romped with brass fire extinguishers. He saw the door to the Royal Suite was bright with hot light, and beyond the frame an inner door was crackling like a grate.

A hand dropped on Keats' shoulder. Anton Stehli was standing behind him.

"The suite!" Keats shouted.

Stehli remained in his attitude of detached sadness. "We heard it. Dubail, Nielsen and I. We came in not ten minutes ago from the Telegraf, and were sitting in the public stenographer's booth. It sounded like an incendiary bomb."

"A bomb—"

"To start so violent a blaze. See, the dining room door, there, is split to kindling." The Swiss was shouting, but his expression was that of conversation. Like yelling quietly. His fingers bit into Keats' shoulder. "It is going to be very bad."

"The fire?" Keats yelled.

"No, my friend. The floors are fireproof. It will be confined to those rooms. But why did they burn that dining room, with those two in there? Did you hear the latest at your news bureau? The Teutons may declare condition-of-danger-of-war—"

Keats' hands had begun to tremble uncontrollably.

"Wait!" Stehli pointed. "Dubail and Nielsen are up there now. They will rescue our luggage if they can." He cupped his palms at Keats' head. "Have you seen the young Englishman? He will be lost in this madness!"

"I can't hear you!" Keats shouted back. "Do you know if Paul Emmerich is in the hotel?"

"We left him at the Café Guste some time ago," the answer came through the din. "Terrible things are happening tonight. At the Telegraf I received a wire—my paper has recalled me to Switzerland, at once. I do not like the sound of it. Look—the firemen!"

A SQUAD of helmets charging in from the terrace. Axes gleaming. Hose. Brass nozzles. Loud, stuttering commands. Swimming down

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from the mezzanine, the smoke curled through the lobby in a biscuit-colored fog. Keats hugged the desk, coughing, and turned to see Stehli's body, caught in the whirl, go bumping off through the crowd. Head of Moses uplifted above the pandemonium of Baal. The brass-hatted police were driving the stampede toward the doors, billies swinging. "Line up there! Line up! Plenty of time!" A tall woman whose peach satin evening gown had been torn off to the waist had caught an ankle in a writhing loop of fireman's hose. Her blond hair twirled around her powdered shoulders like a carnival dancer's. Stehli sprang to catch her as she fell; swung her into his arms and lifted her clear of the stampede.

Keats hooked an arm across his eyes and stumbled for the stairs. An angry fireman barred his way. People were coming down the staircase in a surging cascade.

"John—Keats!"

The cry passed him in the smoke. He spun to glimpse Alexandra Frantsovna swept beyond reach in the outrushing jam. Must have just escaped her room. Her hat, a white toque trimmed with blue braid, was mashed jauntily on one side of her head. She had changed into a traveling suit, brown military trench coat. She waved a black patent leather traveling case, crying out:

"Look for me outside! Must see you!"

He tried to answer, but the fireman was driving at him with both fists. "One side, foreigner! Back! Back!" Firemen galloped by him, dragging hose. Water was streaking on the mezzanine. A stream had smashed the burning door, and the dining room beyond was a molten, hissing hole. Vague shadows ran down the staircase in the cindery fog. Nielsen. Dubail. He could see the dry shine of Dubail's teeth, and the gleam of the Swedish correspondent's monocle. Dubail's arms were loaded with typewriters, pieces of luggage. Nielsen staggered with his pigskin kitbag on his shoulder, Keats' suitcase in hand.

Tight-nerved, stiff as if waiting for a blow, Keats hailed them.

"*Sacré!*" Dubail raced at him. "I wanted to see into that dining room. A furnace! We saved as much luggage as we could—"

Nielsen flung the salvaged suitcase. "Some story, eh? Blew up that dining room! Fire bomb!"

Keats leered sickishly. His head felt airy, faint. Young Shepler's body up there. But they hadn't entered the bathroom. Heartsick, he stumbled after his two companions, across the cleared lobby, into night. The terrace was thronged with firemen and police. The plaza a solid mass of people.

"I've got to find a cab," Keats yelled to Dubail. "I'm going to the Alexanderplatz!"

Dubail hadn't heard him. Cantering along the fringe of the mob, the *Etoile* reporter suddenly shot an arm in the air, pointing above the drift of hats. "Look there! Look at that!"

Men were shouting and trampling, milling about some hub of interest in the street. Keats saw the crowd's eye was not on the hotel, where the blaze was now not apparent from the outside, but attention had switched with that strange wolf-pack instinct toward a new excitement.

Dubail lifted a yell. "Stehli!"

THE Swiss was caught against the fender of a crimson fire truck. His coat had been snatched from his back, and his linen blouse hung in

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fragments. His face, illuminated by a street lamp, looked swollen and unnatural, and under the tangled thicket of his hair his eyes were bright coals of defiance.

Nielsen blurted an oath at Keats' elbow. "They will kill him!" Even as the Swedish newspaperman spoke a fist pumped out of the crowd and struck the side of Stehli's head. The Swiss could not retaliate. Two hatless young men held his right arm pinned to the fender of the truck. A big sandy man in a black jersey had hold of Stehli's left arm and was turning it around and around in the shoulder socket as if it were some kind of crank.

On the driver's seat of the truck a fireman leaned bare elbows on the polished handrail and looked down with lack of interest. Farther down the curb a policeman directed traffic with no time for this. His brass helmet was aloof, his business conveniently elsewhere. But the girl struggling on the inside wall of the mob was interested, her face white with anger, her arms squirming to evade the clutch of a grinning Work Trooper who held her back. "Swine!" Alexandra Frantsovna was wailing. "Let me go! Take your dirty hands off that man! Leave him alone!"

"Hang the dirty scoundrel!"

"Break the rat's neck!"

"Show the rascal no filthy foreigner can put his arms around a Teuton woman!"

"Dragged her out of the hotel, and her dress half off! Emil and Hans saw her, too! Teach the swine his place!"

Sounds crashed and flooded over Keats' head. Gongs ringing. Auto horns. Cries. Oaths. He saw Alexandra Frantsovna yanked backward. The crowded faces closing in were masks of imbecility. Features scribbled with the fun of hate. Wolves baying for a victim. A final vandalism for this midnight's hecatomb. He heard Nielsen's warning shout, "Don't go into that, Dubail!"

But the lame newswriter's black head was tossing through the swarm, his fists lashing out.

"Let him alone, you swine! Unhand the Swiss! *Mon Dieu,* you cannot torture the man—"

The twisted faces caught and spat out the "*mon Dieu.*"

"Here is an Esperenchman for us to play with!"

THE night took up the roar. Keats felt as if his head would burst. He was fighting blindly, kicking, beating, forcing his way to Dubail's side where the tumult was wildest. A wide man with the face of an infuriated moose towered over Dubail.

"Frog, we will show you how we treat murderers and assassins! We will show you how we entertain a spy!"

Dubail's head came up. "I am no spy, but an honest citizen of Esperance and a guest of your government like this Swiss whom you have brutally manhandled—"

"Blackguard! Thief! The Esperench assassinated our Premier!"

"I am neither blackguard nor thief," Dubail drew himself up scornfully, speaking to the crowd, "but I am Esperench and proud of the fact. As for this Swiss gentleman, this lady and these colleagues, they are newspaper correspondents like myself, and friends of Herr Paul Emmerich of the *Tageblatt,* who has connections with General Gottlieb von Neumann of your High Command. If our credentials cannot win respect among you, I will

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tell you something that can. That *salopard* in the black jersey will take his hands off the Swiss or I will put a bullet in his thick skull where he stands—"

"I'm with you, Raoul," Keats promised. He sidled against Dubail with his fingers ready at his hip.

Words muttered in English from the corner of Dubail's twisted mouth. "We must bluff fast. I have somewhere tonight lost my gun—"

The sandy-haired man in the black jersey had dropped Stehli's wrist to leap behind the moose-faced citizen. An ugly, deep-throated hissing issued from the close-packed faces.

"Bash the frog's head for him!"—"The Esperench swine threatens us!"—"Show him how the Fatherland will handle his country the next time!"—"Give it to the foreigners!"—"The American, too!"—"Hell with them!"

Light sped across Keats' vision. *Tang!* The hurled beer mug burst like a shell on Dubail's jaw. Hand covering his mouth, Dubail remained swaying upright, blood pouring on his chin. Somewhere in the jam Alexandra Frantsovna screamed. Colt leveled, John Keats stepped between Dubail and the massive man whose bovine jaw was chewing out oaths. The man's jaw stopped chewing. His eyes dilated at sight of the gun, and he whirled, tried to claw himself backward into the crowd. Bodies surged, piling up like a dark tidal wall gathering to crash over Keats and bury him deep in the street.

His teeth grinned ivory. He could see this antagonist. A human mob. Better than the thing which had wizarded away up there in that bedroom. "Come on! What are you waiting for?" he growled.

It seemed as if the charge was waiting for the only climax that could have stopped it. It came. Down the plaza it whirled like a wind, catching at people on pavements and curbs, sweeping around corners, echoing over treetops and roofs; a yell that thickened to a many-toned roar and filled the city cañons with a million echoes.

"Schnitzler has declared condition-of-danger-of-war! Schnitzler has declared condition-of-danger-of-war!"

Another, a wilder outcry roared down the plaza, as if ten thousand paper boys had followed with a final edition.

"Schnitzler just landed at Tempelhof Airdrome! Schnitzler is coming! Schnitzler is coming!" The news was carried above a staccato rataplan of hoofbeats; mounted police racing across the square with the sound of cavalry. "Make way before the Metropole! *Schnitzler kommt!*"

MEN blew like leaves before this gale, leaping around corners, tumbling and skipping to go scattering away up the sidewalks. Things were happening too fast for John Keats, right then. Dimly he made out the Russian girl and Dubail hauling Stehli to his feet, the Swiss' face sweaty green, his left arm dangling. A red and black taxicab wheeling past the fire cart, slowing at the curb; Nielsen's face hollering from the cab window.

"Inside, all of you! This man will take us!"

The cab driver's blue eyes were kindly under a rag of cap. "Step in quickly, *herren,* I will gladly assist. I saw it all, *ja.* The Hebrew was only helping the lady out of the hotel—"

Nielsen and Dubail propped the fainting Stehli between them on the rear seat. Suitcases, typewriters, the Swede's kitbag, John Keats and the

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Russian girl tangled together in what little space remained. The cabby honking, juggling the hack for an opening in traffic. His anxious visage screwed around in the driver's window.

"Where to, *herren?*"

Nielsen's monocle glared through the strap-handle of a suitcase. "Take us to the North Station!"

"Gladly, *mein herr!*"

"No," Keats bawled. "Drop me at the Alexanderplatz Police—"

"Impossible," the Swedish correspondent cried. "Police won't see you, Keats. I've been there twice tonight. Threw me out." His voice bit through a fanfare of motor horns. "And Teutony has just declared danger-of-war! With this national emergency they'll throw a *Razzia* around the hotel. Arrest us all to stop the bombing story."

Dubail cried, "I must get to Esperance—"

"We can just about make that one-thirty train," Nielsen yelled. "The European Express—"

John Keats thrust an aching head through the driver's window. "North Station. We've got ten minutes—"

The cab screeched around a turn, piling him against Alexandra Frantsovna's huddled form. Luggage swarmed around them. A moment the girl's cheek was pressed against his, marble cold. Her stifled voice barely brushed his ear. "On the train—must talk to you without fail—"

"Right."

CHAPTER VI.

EUROPEAN EXPRESS!

THE Wagons-Lits, the Pullmans of Europe, boast a number of advantages over the American sleeping car. Constructed on Continental lines, the European sleeper, first class, has a narrow corridor running the length of the car on one side; instead of curtained berths, doors open off the passage into private compartments; the traveler may occupy a compartment to himself, bed, table, washstand, window giving view to fleeing countryside.

To nullify these comforts one suffers a suspicion that seventy miles an hour is too fast for a system engineered without automatic block signals; the locomotive shrieks four times where the American hogger blows once; the train must stop at any of a dozen cow pastures or frontiers for any of a dozen complications. A bull astride the rails. Teuton police ferreting for an anarchist. Bomb-scare on a mountain trestle. Inspection of baggage, tickets, visas, permits of entry, passports. Europe builds fine roads, then clogs them with red tape.

There were train guards. Captains. Police guards. Railroad officers with Francis Joseph sidewhiskers. A division chief. Two officers of the Reichwehr. They threw the sliding doors of the compartments and stamped in. Tickets. Visas. Permits. Passports.

John Keats leaned against the window in Stehli's compartment, calming bruised nerves with a pipe, watching Dubail massage the Swiss newspaperman's sprained arm, listening in pretended indifference to their talk. Plenty of time for his chat with Frantsovna, and he needed a breathing spell, a chance to think his way back through this Witch's Sabbath, time to sort the hand and choose his game.

One thing was certain; the attempts on his own life and poor Shepler's murder tied up somewhere with the violent end of Von Speer and Gatreau in that dinner-hour camarilla. Hard to think when your ears were deaf

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from the sound of all hell popping. Europe teetering on the lip of a volcano.

Propped on his swaying bunk, Stehli was gesturing a quarter-filled whisky glass at his companions, his face furrowed, dejected. The Swiss was not lamenting any personal injury.

"I tell you, this is the beginning of the end. For all of us. The Teutons declaring danger-of-war. That Metropole shooting was the spark, and they have fanned it to a torch. The haystack waits."

DUBAIL did not think so. "We cannot afford a war, *mon vieux.*"

"Money? There is always money for the guns to shoot. Not enough for honest debts, but plenty for the melting into howitzers."

"The man will not be so ready to march again," Dubail said, doggedly optimistic. "They will not go."

"And I was just telling you, the new crop is raised. See how they have supported the dictators and buried democracy, learned the old catch-words and invented newer and more violent ones. Our youth has been weaned on a rifle bullet. Already our school books are calling the World War the war of 1914-1918. One-third of the world population of today cannot remember the Armistice. And how could they? Not when its memory is allowed but two measly minutes a year."

"But," Dubail said over his glass, "there are mature minds who do remember. The older generation—"

"Bah! It is we old ones who have failed the young. The World War soldiers who suffered—for the most part they are dead. The maimed are imprisoned in hidden hospitals; they make nice cane-bottom chairs but they do not make polite table conversation. Blinded, dismembered, they are studiously forgotten. The lucky who came out unscathed are the biggest liars of all. They do not like to speak about the War, no. Their silence is a falsehood. Youth sees them as heroic veterans from the romance of the past—"

"*Eh bien.*" Dubail stared through his knees at the vibrating floor. "Where is an answer, my friend? Peaceful men like you are victims for the mob. See how they treated you tonight. It is hard to love an enemy, hardest when you see him harming a friend. If I had found my gun—"

"No, no, Dubail! That is not the answer—"

"Perhaps not, but the only answer a bloody *lourdaud* like that scoundrel in the black jersey can understand." He stood up, punching his fists into his pockets. "*Enfin,* I would like to know what became of my gun."

"You lost a gun?" Keats put in, with masked interest.

The Esperenchman scowled. "It was in that curst hotel bedroom. Under the pillow on my cot. *Peste!* I dash up there during the hotel fire, make a hasty grab for the pistol, it is not there. What is more, the bed was in a fine uproar."

THE compartment door slid open with an oily creak. Thick-lensed spectacles, comedy sidewhiskers framed themselves in the opening. Scanning the compartment, the myopic spectacles finally settled a suspicious glance on John Keats.

"You are the American correspondent, *Herr Keats?*"

Keats bit the pipe-stem in his teeth, steeling himself for fresh disaster. So the Teuton police octopus had put out a feeler at last. "What can I do for you? I'm John Keats."

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The whisker-garnished face squinted in the rattling doorway. "A message for you, *mein herr*. The Fräulein in Compartment Seven would like you to call at her door."

His grin masked relief.

"My thanks, and I will come directly."

"Romance?" Dubail smiled, after the official had departed.

Keats scowled in spurious annoyance. "Hardly. I promised the woman I'd give her some details on the Von Speer-Gatreau fracas."

Dubail joined him at the door. "Myself, I am that tired I feel as if I had been flogged. It will necessitate drinking myself to sleep. You are all right, Stehli? Then I bid you good night, *messieurs*."

Keats watched the Esperenchman rocking down the corridor to his door at the far end of the car; then, closing Stehli's door with a "See you in the restaurant car for breakfast," in a lively tone he by no means echoed from the heart, he hurried up the forward end of the passage, hunting Number Seven.

When Alexandra Frantsovna answered his knock he wrenched the door open, swung into her compartment, closed the panel swiftly. She stood at once from her seat near the window, reaching out to give him both hands.

"Bolt the door," she said in a low voice.

He slid the clasp; swung to face her, yanking off his hat. Her face looked drawn, pale, lipstick on her mouth unnaturally carmine. She had not altered the costume in which she had escaped the hotel fire, traveling suit, military trench coat belted tightly man-fashion, white and blue toque tilted soldierly on her head. Her portable typewriter sat on the folding table, a sheet of manuscript paper untouched in the machine.

"You were going to tell me something—" he began uncertainly.

"Yes."

"And I wanted to see you," he told her, sitting stiffly on the bed. "Stehli—the Swiss—asked me to thank you for trying to help him in that street fight."

"You've been hurt!" she cried. "Your head is cut."

"A scratch. I fell down."

"Let me bandage it for you, John Keats." Her eyes had widened, deep blue with alarm. "Ointment. In my traveling case—"

He waved her off brusquely. "It's nothing. Let's come to the point, Frantsovna. What'd you mean, saying you didn't think the minister of Esperance killed the Premier of Teutony?"

SHE chose a cigarette from her case, and returned to her seat at the partly opened window. A dark gale wailed faintly through the cinder-screen, stirring the coppery ringlets about her ears. There was a sudden concussion in the night, a thundering that shook the car, a cinnamon glow in the dark, the drumming tumult of a passing express. Smoke blew in gauzy wisps through the screen. The girl waited tight-lipped for the uproar to diminish. *Whooo*—the night screamed *whooo—whooo—whoooeeee—*

Then, "John Keats, I am almost certain Gatreau did not shoot Von Speer. I dared not say so in my newspaper dispatch—the police censors would have arrested me. But it is true."

Exhaustion betrayed his guard, and suddenly he was savagely angry, leaping up with face suffused, snatching the Russian girl's wrist, yanking her to her feet. He was shaking her.

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"What's the game, Frantsovna? I've had enough of these whispers and hinted secrets. Out with the story. What," he snarled, "were you doing on that roof across from that hotel bedroom tonight? Don't lie to me. The British kid told me he saw you there—"

She listened gravely to this indictment, unresisting in his clutch. "If you will release me, please, I was about to tell you."

He dropped her wrists sullenly. "So you admit you were on that roof just before the shooting?"

"I am not admitting, John Keats, I am telling."

"Out with it, then!"

"Please sit down. You do not need to threaten me like this."

Her calmness baffled his temper. No good blowing up like a paranoiac. Dully he reseated himself on the bed. Above the chanting of the rails, the sewing-machine echo of the cars, her voice came low, vibrant.

"Directly after you escorted Mr. Nielsen into the hotel, tonight—you remember, he had just arrived—I was paged in the lobby. An *Izvestia* editor calling from our branch office on the phone. He wanted photographs of the two statesmen at conference, and was going to send a photographer. The Teuton police, it seems, had forbidden photographs. However, the editor asked me to scurry around the hotel to discover a place where such pictures might be taken."

"So you ducked around the next building and climbed to the roof, is that it?"

"That," she nodded, "is it. I located a fire escape at the back, and walked over the roof hunting a location for our camera man."

"I see. And the best station for your camera man was exactly across from the windows of the bedroom occupied by the press."

"No," she ignored his caustic implication, "I was not spying into your windows, John Keats. I saw them, yes. And I saw you run to the sill and stare out. But I was hidden behind a chimney across from the windows of the dining room, you see. I was looking in at the two who sat at table."

"And who else was on that roof over there with you?"

Her expression was bewildered. "Was somebody else?"

IT was on his tongue to tell her about the knife-throwing episode, but her next declaration sat him bolt upright in astonishment.

"But I was alone on the roof, and looking into that dining room. I could see but little, for the shades were lowered; but I had a clear picture of the table, Gatreau at one end, Von Speer at the other, apparently engaged in conversation. The view was cut off, you comprehend; I could see their arms, their hands gesturing and thumping, but I could not see their heads, nor did I have a full view of the dining room."

She paused to listen to the hammering undertone of the trucks. "Then all at once," she resumed, "from where I was hiding, I saw *you* at the windows of the next room, the bedroom. You appeared suddenly in the frame and stared out. Fearing you would see me, perhaps raise an outcry, I dodged between the chimney-pots and hid."

Good Lord! Then the woman had been over there when the knife was tossed. She'd seen him jump for the sill. He knew he was staring like a fool, and he wanted to take her by the neck and shake the truth out of her,

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but he could only blurt: "And nobody was on the roof besides you—"

"I didn't see anybody," was her wondering reply. "Did you?"

"I heard you over there," he hedged. "Thought it was a sneak thief, or something. Go on! Where'd you go from there?"

"Why, I saw you lean out of the window and look down into the court. Then you pulled down the bedroom shades. After that you must have left the suite, for I saw the lights in the bedchamber go out. I crept back to the chimney from where I could see into the dining room. I was wondering how a camera might manage some sort of picture with one of those new periscope lenses or something and then —I don't know why I was looking at them"—her fingers were twisting nervously in her lap, her eyes widened, blue, enigmatic—"I don't know why I was looking at them, but I was watching the hands of Baron Von Speer, and I saw red drops begin to fall on them, as if someone had thrown from over his shoulder a glass of claret. It was amazing. Drop, drop, drop. His fingers clawed across the table cloth and he knocked over the goblet at his elbow. Nothing of his head or body could I see but only that little strip between window-sash and sill, his elbows and waist. He seemed twisting, sagging in his chair. Then his hand dropped to his belt, yanked out his pistol. It—his hand was dripping red."

"You didn't hear the shots?" Keats cried.

"Not a sound. It was twenty feet across the court. The windows were all down. It was like a silent picture on colored film. There was a spurt of fire from the Teuton Premier's gun. Once! Flash!"

"Gatreau! What was *he* doing?"

"And that is just it," the girl whispered. "At first the Esperench minister's hands were resting on his napkin. Then he stood up, clutching at the edge of the table, body twisted at the middle as if looking at someone behind him. I could see no more of the room. Only the two at table. Von Speer's red fist on that gun of his, and Gatreau standing upright. Then he fell across the table, face among the dishes. *And there was no gun at that time in the Esperench Minister's hand!*"

KEATS' vision blurred. The compartment dimmed and swam. Only the girl's whitened face stood clear in the foreground. He could hear his words going, metallic as the flying click of the car-wheels. "You're trying to tell me Von Speer was shot to sponge, and Victor Gatreau didn't do it? The Esperenchman fell across the table without any gun?"

"It is what I saw."

"Why didn't you tell that to the police?"

Alexandra Frantsovna said quietly, "Because I did not trust the Teuton police. I am from a Communist country. I would have been arrested for espionage. There are other reasons, John Keats. I was—stunned. At once I knew another party must be in that dining room. I fled across the roof to the fire escape. I would phone the Soviet embassy for them to give the alarm. On the fire escape I was halted. It was that English boy, that young journalist, Shepler. He must have tried to follow me. A soldier in the court had seen him, and was—how do you say?—bawling him up. The boy ran down into the court. I waited for the soldier to go away, and hurried down

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around to the back street and into a side entrance of the hotel. I could hardly think."

She swayed against the window, caught off her hat and shook her hair. "What should I do? I ran straight into that Swedish newspaperman, Nielsen. He took me by an arm and said I must have a drink with him on the terrace. I went out to the table, thinking I must talk with somebody, I must talk with you, John Keats—"

"Why me?"

Her hand trembled on his sleeve. "Do you not see? I am hardly known to those others. You have seen me before. Perhaps you I could trust. An American, not involved in this Chinese box that is Europe. But—"

"Then you knew the statesmen were murdered while you sat there with us at the table!"

"Only I had no chance to talk with you. A moment later the news was out. We rush up to the dining room. And there it is, the two men are dead, and I see a pistol is, after all, in the Esperench Minister's hand!"

"So you must have been mistaken the first time," he rapped.

"Mistaken! Never!" She stood away from him, white-lipped. "Never was I mistaken. From the roof I saw Gatreau fall without a gun. In the dining room there is a pistol in his hand. Do you understand it, then? Someone, after I was gone from the roof, entered the room of death and planted that pistol!"

Keats' face was gray and sweating. Whisky, his scalp-wound, the lateness of the hour had put dagger edges on his nerves. The whir of the wheels speeding them down the night was like the sound of his aching brain. He groped to his feet and braced himself, unsteadily confronting the girl.

"Just why are you telling this yarn to me?"

"I told you before. You are an American. Of a reputation. I had to tell somebody, and you—I felt I could trust you. Don't you see? The others are Europeans, opinionated, suspicious, perhaps—guilty."

"Guilty?"

"Involved in this murder plot," she whispered fiercely. "To kill Von Speer and Gatreau. To embroil Europe. Oh, can't you understand how big, how terrible this is? Listen! After the police dismissed us from that dining room, I fled to my own room and wrote a plausible story to Moscow. Then, instead of going to the *Izvestia* bureau, I rushed to the Soviet embassy. Naturally the buildings were closed, so late at night. I could arouse no one. John Keats, I was desperate. I am not known in the Teutonic capital. I hurried back to the Metropole, hoping to find you. They told me all the correspondents had left. I had to see into that dining room again, but the sentry refused me admittance. But I went into your bedroom and saw what I wanted."

A STRING of empty box cars made a booming on a siding.

"What did you see?" Keats blared.

"That door into the dining room—with a transom! Cannot you understand what I am trying to say? The dining room was under close guard. On the outside. But anyone in the bedroom could have opened that transom and fired into the dining room; killed Von Speer and Gatreau. It must have been after you switched off the light. You and Nielsen left the room together?"

"Yes."

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"Then anyone with a press card could have sneaked into the bedroom."

Anyone with a press card! It shocked him mentally alert. Nielsen had gone wandering in the lobby to seek a stenographer. Emmerich, inside somewhere after cigarettes. Stehli? There were rear entrances to the hotel by which the Swiss could have dodged in unobserved, gained the press room and down before Keats threaded the lobby to the terrace. Even Dubail, deserted at table, could have entered the hotel, taken elevator to mezzanine, ducked into the suite and out again—and there were those missing .38 shells and that cufflink ground into the carpet near that between-rooms door.

"Frantsovna! For God's sake, if you suspect anybody—"

She said in alto desperation, "But there are so many motives! What were the statesmen discussing? Were they killed to hide a government scandal? Did the Teutons wish both men out of the way? It would not be the first time Schnitzler's party executed a high official. Suppose Von Speer was plotting a government overthrow with Esperench help? In that case—"

"Emmerich?"

"I do not accuse," the girl denied. "I merely try to discover the motive. Also there is Anton Stehli. You recall him saying he would rather see those statesmen dead than have them start another war?"

"But that shooting was exactly the thing to start a war—"

"What if the man was turned in the mind? Off-balance. Remember, a son of Stehli's was accidentally killed in the last war. Suppose he has brooded. In his mind he blames the diplomats. Such revenges are not unknown. And there is Raoul Dubail of the *Etoile* Service—"

"Would he kill Gatreau, one of his own countrymen?"

"I do not know." Alexandra Frantsovna's voice was close to tears. "I only try to weed out the ones who could have been in that bedroom. Nielsen, too. He was in the hotel. The young English journalist is the only one who could not, because he was on that fire escape—"

Her voice broke, as if the telling of her secret had released overwrought nerves, and hiding her face in slim hands, she began to cry silently. John Keats watched this feminine performance in a misery of consternation. The abracadabra of the past twenty-four hours had almost robbed his capacity for thought, and the Russian girl's disclosure had scattered the jigsaw forty ways. He couldn't stand there gawking, either. They were going places at seventy miles an hour, and things were doing. The world, wound up too tightly, had broken its governor. He could see the night flying past the window. Events running wild in the dark. Every second counting. If he could but lift a palm and holler, "Stop!" for time out to think.

"Here!" He balanced the whisky bottle on the table. "Take this—"

She looked up gratefully, brushing a copper-gold strand from her forehead with the back of a hand. Despite the tears, there was undeniable charm to the smooth oval of her face. Something devilish attractive about these foreign women. She was saying in that throaty accent, "I am so sorry. And I am—frightened—"

"You," he ordered gruffly, "turn in. I mean, get some sleep. Lots of time before we reach the Rhine, and meanwhile keep your story under your hat until I can figure out what to do with it. Don't tell anybody, see? It's dyna-

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mite and wants some damned careful handling. I don't mind saying I've got a couple of sticks in my own pocket. I think Gatreau and Von Speer knew about it, and that's why they were knocked off. Somebody's trying to fire the stuff. That's the one we've got to get, and we've got to get him quick—"

PACING the floor didn't help. Neither did soaking his head under the faucet. Smoking cigarettes, he stood at his compartment window and stared at rushing night. Six minutes of four. Five minutes of four. Damn that hogger in the cab, he'd race them all to hell before he could gather his wits.

Nielsen! Completely slipped his mind. The Swede had wanted to see him. Something urgent. Man had been waiting for him all this time; had something to tell him.

With swift, quiet strides John Keats got himself to the Swedish correspondent's door. But his knuckles never contacted the panel with their intended knock. As his fist moved upward to rap the wood something lumpish struck the inside of the door, *bump!* sodden as a thrown cabbage. The door jarred perceptibly under the blow, and at the same moment the Wagon-Lit slewed on curving rails, pitching Keats off balance across the passage.

He was back like a snapped spring, ears stiff to listen above the hammering gallop of the wheels. Things were doing behind Door Five. Sock and whack! Grunting. A quick scuffle of shoes. Stifled gasps. Nielsen's voice exploding muffled Scandinavian, then queerly pleading, whining words Keats couldn't understand. A second voice, pixie-thin, womanish, screeling a parroty gibberish of anger in a tongue foreign yet oddly familiar to Keats' hearing. There was a choked-off moan; the faint tinkle of bursting glass. *Sluff!* A heavy object dropped on wood.

"Nielsen! Kurt Nielsen!" Yelling like a Choctaw, Keats struck the door, recoiled, struck harder. Catamaran. Wood bulged under his slamming shoulder, but the inner bolts held. "Nielsen—are you all right?"

WITHOUT awaiting an answer —none came—he assaulted the door with his gun-butt, hammering, pounding. Splinters flew. Bolts groaned, cracked loose. Prying at the frame for leverage, he succeeded in jamming the gun barrel between door and sill. A wrench, the report of a snapping hasp, and the door slid crashing in its grooves; unable to check himself, Keats stumbled inward. Instantly he was crouched, gun leveled to shoot. Then the automatic froze with the blue veins in his hand.

The compartment had been in darkness, but the bilious illumination from the corridor entered the gloom in sooty yellow shafts to dimly penetrate a haze of cindery smoke. Wind struck at Keats' face, ruffling his uplifted hair. Floor, walls, bunk, ceiling, wash stand, window—his eyes sped around the compartment, taking in a scene of furious disorder, the overturned typewriter, manuscript scattered everywhere, a toilet case spilling its contents in the wash basin, Nielsen's big pigskin bag kicked into a corner, clothing askew on the luggage rack, evidence of terrific conflict.

In the center of the floor, body twisted in the folds of his silk black and gold lounging robe, knees drawn up, arms outflung, Nielsen lay on his back with his mouth open in a posture of sleeping nightmare. Even in slum-

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ber his features were contorted with terror, a mask of fright, stained from chin to forehead a glistening wine-color, a grass-green bruise the size of a toadstool swelled above one closed eye, and in his wheat-colored pompadour a shimmering tiara of shattered glass. His head lay toward the window, his slipper-toes pointing at Keats; the neck of the bottle that had given him that facial made a jagged gleam against the sidewall. A stertorous snoring gurgled from his throat; and John Keats gained his side at a leap.

Kurt Nielsen was not dead; but where was the enemy who had knocked him out? Someone had been in this compartment not fifty seconds before; someone with a strangely foreign voice; someone who had smashed a full bottle of Hulstkamp's over the Scandinavian's crown. Keats explored the empty corners with astounded eyes. The window was open and the cinder screen gone from the sash, admitting a seventy-mile-an-hour smoke barrage.

Cursing, Keats threw himself at the sill, thrust head and shoulders out into the whistling darkness. Cinders pelted his face. Far rearward down the swaying black wall of cars that dwindled in perspective glimmered the trailing green comet of the tail light. Forward, bending a curve, the bonfire-yellow smear of the engine-cab, the swinging white spear of the headlight tunneling through dark, the cinnamon spray of the stack. *Whooo—whooo—whoooeeee—* No man alive would have gone out of that window.

But for himself and the unconscious Nielsen, there was no man visible in the Swede's compartment, nor any visible place for a man to hide. Lips parted on soundless profanity, John Keats dropped to his knees beside the recumbent body and began a frantic first aid on the contused forehead. He saw faint color return to the grassy eyelids, the lips stirred on a sigh, life came into one outsprawled arm. As Keats strained to lift the man to a sitting posture, Nielsen's right fist came unclenched and a little rag of torn paper scurried from his cataleptic clutch.

Keats snatched the scrap from the floor; held it up to the light. He felt his lungs go empty, all feeling rush from his fingers. That crumpled scrap of ricepaper had been torn from a book. The scrap was gilt-edged. Page 63 in the upper corner. Only a single line of print along the raggedy edge, but the aborted sentence of diminutive black letters lithographed themselves with a smash on his brain:

So Foul A Sky Cannot Be Cleared Without A—

Good God! He could complete that sentence of Shakespeare's from memory. "Without a storm!" And clouds had ridden like horsemen across the city's skyline. They'd been sitting on the Metropole terrace. Word had just come of the shooting. Gilt-edged book! Frantsovna!

Pearls of sweat stood on his face as he tucked the bit of paper into his dressing robe and began to shake Nielsen by the shoulders. "Nielsen! Nielsen! It's Keats! Who was in here—"

IN the midst of all this chaos, John Keats knew he didn't want to hear any name, to listen to the name of this vanished assailant. Somehow he had closed the corridor door and snapped on the overhead light; voices were making an angry chattering somewhere up the passage. In his extremity, he wrestled the tall man to his feet, clutched him upright as one might hold

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an inebriate, shook him until his jaw rattled. Incoherent Scandinavian words mumbled from Nielsen's loose mouth, and for a moment his half opened eyes stared at Keats without recognition. Then abruptly he shocked fully awake, and grabbed Keats by the arms.

"You!"

"Who went out of that window?" Keats husked thickly. "Tell me quick who it was—"

The man fumbled dazedly at his swollen temple. "Where—where did you say it—it went?"

"Who was it, Nielsen! For God's sake—"

"Why," the Swede's pale eyes were misty with bewilderment, "I swear to God, I—I don't know. By Heaven, Keats," his voice quickened in agitation, "I—I was waiting in here for *you!* Did you hear the fight?"

"Hell! I broke in the door and found you knocked cold. Someone was in here, and—"

Nielsen blurted, "Oh course there was! I tell you, I don't know who the devil—listen, I was waiting for you to come. You had said you'd be back. I know—I was going to ask you about Dubail!"

"Dubail?" Keats had to gulp.

Nielsen wet his lips, supporting himself with a shaky hand. "The *Etoile* correspondent, yes! I was going to ask you how well you knew the fellow. Check up on him—because of the Metropole shooting—Von Speer and Gatreau—"

"Lord!" Keats groaned, "how does Dubail figure in that—"

"I want to know," the injured man panted. "That's why I'm leaving that news story cold to get to Esperance. You know there was something fishy about that Metropole affair and so do I. Outside job. I can't explain, but—suppose a man hated Gatreau, planned to murder him, shot him in that dining room? Well, he'd have to kill Von Speer, too—"

"What do you mean?" Keats whispered tensely.

"Only this," Nielsen twisted out. "Raoul Dubail has hated Gatreau for years. Always wrote articles against him. Once they had a fistfight outside the Chamber of Deputies. Dubail told another newspaperman he would get Gatreau some time if it was his last act. Seven years ago. I remembered the talk it created among the profession. Going to ask you about it tonight—if you knew. I was waiting in here; there was a knock at the door; I thought you'd come—"

He dragged a wrist across his wine-drenched face. "I was writing there by the window, and called, 'Come in and shut the door,' and didn't look up from the typewriter. Next second, just after the door closed, the lights were out. Fellow must have pushed the switch, and I heard the door lock, too. I jumped around—something hit me in the face. The devil was strangling me." Nielsen put his hands to his throat, and fear grew in his eyes. "I thought it was *you,* by Heaven! Didn't know what the devil it was all about—in the dark."

"You didn't see—"

"Blind as a bat, I tell you." He mashed a handkerchief to his sick mouth. "Lord, I'm all in from that blow. Things were flying in the dark—fists, glass, seemed to wear a cape—I thought he—it—struck me with a book—"

KEATS speculated, "Whoever it was jumped out of the window," and hoped the nausea in his head wouldn't prevent his reaching the cor-

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ridor door where fists had started an imperious knocking. A heavy basso demanded, "What's going on in there, Number Five?"

Pallor crawled under the stickiness on the Swede's face. His nostrils fluttered. "Don't tell anything," he whispered. "Fellow's gone. I'll wire police next station to hunt along tracks. Your word of honor about Dubail." The knocking loudened sharply. Nielsen's eyes flicked at the door. "Cut the light. Tell them it was delirium tremens. Anything. I'll see you later. We must talk. Esperance—meet there—"

Keats assented, "Right," and, darkening the compartment, slid the door and lounged out into the passage. He pulled the door, put his fists in his pockets to hide their agitation, and found himself genially fabricating to a pair of frowsy-eyed train guards. This was nothing to concern them. Passenger behind Door Five had just suffered, and quite recovered from, a violent spasm of D.Ts. Routed from the forward car by the disturbance, the guards (dead ringers for Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum) lifted suspicious railroad lanterns at Keats' face, but didn't fail to light up the banknotes ready in his hand. Keats lied with skill, managing arrogance. In his own country he was a physician of repute. The gentleman in Compartment Five would best be left alone to sleep it off. Had anyone in the car been aroused by this unfortunate incident?

The guards winked. Drunken tourists were not a novelty to European trains. They wanted to get forward to the mail coach where the train captain was telling about the excitements at the capital.

"No, *Herr Doktor*, no one else is disturbed. There are only the foreign journalists aboard this car; few people traveling tonight. Both the Swiss in Compartment Two and the Esperenchman in One were asleep just now when we examined their doors. Only one other passenger in the car. That Russian woman in Number Seven—"

Keats' heart missed a beat. "Those vestibule doors," he put the question casually, "are never open?"

"Not while the train is moving, *Herr Doktor*. Both ends are locked, with guards on the other side. If you wish to get through you merely ring the call bell. A porter will come. Call us if we may be of further assistance. Let us hope Number Five will be all right. Thank you a thousand. Good night."

John Keats did not watch them depart. John Keats was staring down the corridor like a blind man, eyes riveted on Door Seven. Door Seven had opened, and Alexandra Frantsovna was framed in the swaying dimness, a picture in black lace negligee, her copper-glinting hair loosed in a shimmering shawl about ivory shoulders, the pale oval of her face glowing with dark-eyed alarm. John Keats forced his legs to maneuver him up the passage toward his own compartment; but he whirled too quickly as her voice called him around.

She looked at him steadily. "John Keats. Everything is all right?"

"Never better."

But he could have enjoyed the D.Ts. himself when he shut himself behind his door. He fastened the bolt elaborately; fumbled out his automatic and placed it alongside the pillow of his bed. Nerves twittering like a thousand sparrows, he dropped his head beside the unlimbered gun. Seventy miles an hour the European Express flogged on its way to the Rhine. The pert radium

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face of his wrist dial smirked 4.34. Grayish pallor seeped across the window pane. *Whooo—whoooeeeeeeee—*

And this infernal car had been locked at each vestibule. Only passengers aboard were the foreign correspondents, and all were there. That scrap of paper from the Russian girl's book—in Nielsen's fingers! Who in the name of sanity had gone out of Nielsen's window?

Strength, memory, panic, reason flowed out of John Keats' body into nameless ether. He was asleep.

CHAPTER VII.

ESPERANCE!

THE great spired building on the corner of Boulevard St. Martin and Avenue Jacques overshadows the Parc and the avenue and the tallest plane trees, and rises like a portent against the sky. It is a portent; nightly you may read its pronouncements of good or evil written in moving letters of fire against the stars. Its windows never sleep. Its doors, elevators, telephones are constantly alert. It is tall; so tall its lofty steeple can peer across Esperance, across Europe to the farthest meridian; not thirty stories high, but one thousand stories a day. Taller than the topmost gargoyle of Notre Dame, but it is not a cathedral. If a microscope could not discover the name of God legible on one of its myriad frosted doors, then only a blind man could fail to discern the legend, "*European Headquarters Universe News,*" and on the tallest and frostiest door the legend, "MAJOR ASPRIN."

On this afternoon of blue and gold summer, Major Asprin's eyeballs were as frost-bitten as the glass on his office door. Major Asprin was mad. When he pushed little buttons on his desk, small-boned men three offices away jumped as if stabbed, and scuttled to Major Asprin's door and moaned, "No, Major Asprin, he hasn't come in yet."

Major Asprin squalled into three telephones at once, flung the receiver from a fourth, rumpled his necktie and bawled at his secretary.

"We can't locate him anywhere, sir."

"Call the railroad station. Phone the hotels. Get a detective. Don't stand there like a popeyed catfish. Any word from Teutony?"

"Sorry, sir, the phone service to the Teutonic capital has been cut off," he was told.

Major Asprin's stubbed fingers pounded like drumsticks. His pearl-spatted shoes stamped. Major Asprin wasn't a major—save the title represented a commission in the army of the unemployed (six months a year on his private yacht)—but he could grow every bit as empurpled and muster twice the rage.

"Find him, do you hear me? He's in the country. Bring that crackpotted drunken scoundrel to me if it takes the Republican Guard. Look at that." The major's pointing finger shook. "Look at that, I say!"

The secretary looked and fled the room. "That" was a stack of rival newspapers on the major's desk. Papers from the four ends of Europe. Rome, Amsterdam, Helsingfors. The Copenhagen *Aftenbladet.* Belgrade *Universul.* The *Times* and the *Temps* and the *Dernier Cri.* Five telephones rang in concert. Major Asprin grabbed an armful of receivers and struck the stack of newspapers a wrathful blow, scattering the floor with scareheads. Headlines in twenty languages shouted

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silently from the carpet, drowning the major's squalls in his own very pink ears.

Von Speer and Gatreau Dead In Teutony!
Esperench Minister Slays Teuton Premier!
Europe Rocked By Duel In Hotel Metropole!
Teutons, Esperench Reported Mobilizing!
Swiss Frontier Reported Closed! Allies Alarmed. No Word From Helvania!
Esperance Denies Responsibility. Accuses Teutony. Schnitzler Declares Danger-of-War!
England Aloof In Crisis. London Out Of It, Says Churchwood. Would Appeal to League. Situation Alarming!
Esperance Fears Air Attack, Cholera Germs. Border Forts Prepared. Stocks Go Down as Bourse In Panic—

"No," a voice yammered through the receiver at the major's ear. "No news, Major Asprin. And we've held up the two o'clock editions and America is calling by transatlantic wire every minute. No news at all."

"Fake it! Copy it! Steal the *Etoile* leads! Lovable Christmas!" veins threatened to uproot on the major's forehead, "every other sheet in the world has it by this time, and Universe News without a line!"

He threw the telephones, saw the headline "Bourse in Panic," and rushed to the glass-globed stock-ticker in the corner with an apoplectic squawk. Jets of white tape spurted between his thumbs, more headlines, the story unreeling in cryptic Egyptian numerologies and high-signs. Continental Furniture was ruined. De Lesseps Paper at 6. Metro Underground off 20 points. Amsterdam Dairy at 3. Atlantique shipping dropped from 90 to 7½. The major screamed at these symbols, but he'd been smart about a few things, thank God. Siberian Nickel was up 19. Rubber jumping four points a tick. Gobell Dynamite going 130—140—145. Madrid Metallic was 185. Hertha Gun Works 200. Look at Emmerich Leather of Teutony. And Central Chemicals—

MAJOR ASPRIN made crazy sounds and phone calls. Brokers on the wire. Buy five hundred Hertha Gun, two hundred Gobell Dynamite, Central Chemicals, Emmerich Leather—

"Sorry, major, we'll try. If you'd let us know at opening time this morning when you got the tip on the shooting—"

"Tip on the shooting?" The major would strangle immediately.

"And Universe News is off fifteen points," the phone said dryly, "did you know? Rumor started your syndicate was closing when your papers didn't come out with an extra on the Metropole affair last night—"

The major bawled among the telephones.

A radio cunningly concealed in a panel beside his chair began to shout in a British accent:

"England is calling over Station GBS. Special news release from London! With war momentarily certain on the Continent, Parliament convened this noon to decree Great Britain shall have no part in any conflict unless Powers in question submit their difficulties to League arbitration. McRamsey makes clear any precipitate hostilities will find England on the sidelines, voting for neutrality a hundred to one. Word from Washington brings certainty America will pursue a 'hands off' policy. Here's news from Moscow. In lieu of a Japanese threat, the Soviet Government cannot promise aid to Esperance in event of European war. From Rome. Engaged with hos-

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tilities in Abyssinia, Italy declared neutrality.

"Special dispatch from London *Observer!* As no word has come from *Observer* correspondent, Philip Shepler, covering last night's conference in Teutony, fear is expressed that the young journalist may have died in the Metropole fire. Meanwhile the whole world listens to an ominous silence from Teutony.

"Switzerland is moving troops into Godek Pass. With every reason to fear invasion, the Kingdom of Helvania proclaims strict neutrality, and Europe is wondering what Helvania's Queen will do if—"

The telephone rang. "Local editors calling, Major Asprin. All papers asking for Helvanian news."

The telephone rang. "America on the wire, Major Asprin. New York papers begging information on Helvania."

The telephone rang. "Our London bureau calling, Major Asprin. Want to know why we missed the Metropole shooting scoop."

Major Asprin, owner and operator of the Universe News Agency, the Universe News reputation and the Universe News Building on the corner of Boulevard St. Martin and Avenue Jacques, tore the desk phone clear from the wires with a scream. Pushbuttons rang like doorbells. Nine doors opened at once.

"No, Major Asprin, I'm sorry, but he isn't in yet!"

"Find him," the major trumpeted. "Find that son of a seacook's baboon and bring him straight to me. He got off the train this morning; the station guards saw him. Get him here. I don't care where he is or what he's doing. Arrest him! Kill him! Chloroform him! But get him here!" Major Asprin cooked a lobster-color in his chair. "I want John Keats!"

THE scream charged out of the office and trailed down marble halls. The name of John Keats echoed down stairways and elevator shafts. It caromed into rooms where tired men glared from under green eyeshades and into rooms where linotypes clattered and into rooms where typewriters banged and into caverns twelve stories down where giant Hoe & Co. presses poured mechanical Niagaras of paper over the falls.

It echoed into the oak-paneled conference room one floor up, the room where Anton Stehli, senior Swiss correspondent, was sitting, arm in sling, on a stone window ledge, conjuring bird-like clucks in his throat, and scratching with his free hand the white tail feathers of an inquisitive pigeon.

On the leather lounge in the corner Alexandra Frantsovna waited in studied calm, smart in a white flannel jacket with puff sleeves and low-heeled sport shoes. Might have just run in after a doubles in tennis, but for the latest edition of *Pravda* tucked in her lap and the anxious way her eyes kept watching the door. Then when her eyes left the door they followed the march of Kurt Nielsen who passed back and forth across the line of windows. Under his pulled-down Panama brim, his face was unemotional, but his restless movements betrayed a growing impatience. He turned his wrist to mark the minute on his thin strap-watch. He lit and crushed out another cigarette. He poked his blackthorn stick along the carpet design. He whirled at the windows to stare down on the moving labyrinth of the boulevard. He barked at Stehli and Frantsovna, "Now where do you think that American is?"

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and without waiting for an answer, began to hum nervously the "Valse Triste."

And the summons echoed finally into the semi-darkness of the room exactly under the major's frosty-doored office. The morgue. The newspaper morgue where the dead were regimented not on marble slabs, but in neatly classified catacombs of time-stained newspaper clippings, dusty past-histories spread out to dry. Where the dead were not quite expired as yet, but their obituaries waited in readiness to beat their funerals down the street.

THE two men whispering at a littered table might have been consulting morticians, but were not. One was lank and Yankee, smelled of spearmint gum. The other was thickset and white under the eyes and breathed of whisky as his hands pawed through a box of filed newspaper clippings.

"Beats hell," the one with the chewing gum observed. "I get there to Athens and photograph a pageant—can you beat it?—and miss the swellest pictures of the year. Then I break my neck to get back here by plane, and the Big Boss gives me hell for not being in Teutony, where I wasn't sent. And is he sore up there? A boil. But you was tellin' me how that guy vanishes out the train window last night and the Russian girl stands in her door. So what?"

"I fell asleep in my compartment, I tell you. Never woke up till the train stopped at the frontier. I got hold of Nielsen, then, and told him to sit tight until we could get the crowd together and have a little talk. That's what we are going to have in about five minutes."

"How's your head now?"

"The medico gave me an anti-tetanus injection at the station. What makes it worse, though, is thinking about that business on the train. You know those Teuton inspections. I tell you, the guards know everybody aboard, and if a passenger jumped out of Nielsen's window they'd check it soon enough.

"Well, there it was. Everybody accounted for at the frontier. Nobody was missing."

"Yeah," the gaunt man said, henscratching in his hair, "if I didn't hear it from you I wouldn't take it. Here. Here's another file of names under *G*. You better hurry it. The correspondents are up in the Big Boss's conference room where you asked me to sneak 'em, and if Sour Puss finds out you're here in the building he'll blow out a fuse. Listen. That Russian dame looks the nuts. Swiss has his arm done up. The Squarehead reporter seemed to have ants in his socks, but them other two don't look like killers. This fella Dubail from the *Etoile,* he ain't come yet."

"It's not quite four, is it?"

"It's five after, now. Hell," droned the gangly man, "is popping around here. If I can help—"

"Never mind!" His companion was suddenly sorting a sheaf of news clippings in excited fingers. He looked up, electrified. "I've got it! Here— 'Victor Yvon Césaire Gatreau—Born 1871 in Limoges—Student military engineering, highest honors at Ecole Polytechnique—Abandoned engineering to study Law—Brilliant record in Esperench Peter-Paul trials—At age of thirty elected Chamber of Deputies—Admitted Academy four years later—Made Minister of Public Instruction—Minister of Finance—Awarded Legion of Honor—Ambassador to Ru-

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mania—Took Portfolio of Foreign Affairs under President Villerand, 1934—Married Countess of Tardeau who died heart trouble at ceremony—remained single man thereafter—favors government lottery—advocates Soviet alliance—stirring anti-Schnitzler policy—principal in many duels—' Here's the one, Crazy! Get this!"

The printed columns crackled in his fingers as he read, " ' December Third, 1929. It is common talk on the boulevards today that the two gentlemen seen meeting in a certain spot at dawn yesterday in the Bois de Boulogne were none other than Victor Gatreau, eminent Republican from the Chamber, and M. Raoul Dubail, former Air Corps ace recently recognized for his trenchant editorials and sorties in the field of journalism. He did not fare so well, however, on the field of honor, as it is reported the experienced Gatreau, veteran of many such meetings, struck his young challenger in the cheek at the first exchange of shots. Seconds stopped the duel. It is rumored the engagement was fomented by certain attacks on Gatreau written by the daring journalist. Another source refers the matter to rivalry over the hand of a certain countess recently seen in the company of both. A witness declares Dubail as saying he has by no means received satisfaction in the case, but our inquiring reporter is inclined to think the young gentleman lucky, as a broken heart is seldom so fatal as a punctured one—' "

The gangly man took the gum from his mouth. " Say! I guess this fella Nielsen had the right dope on him, at that."

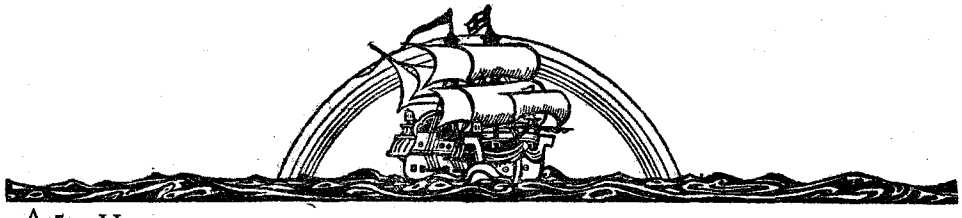
Hinges squeaked in the dimness. A face tinctured by a green eye-shade poked itself through the door at room's end. The man's eyes were worried, and he pointed a blue pencil at the ceiling.

" Say, you guys, I can't keep it quiet any longer you're down here. You should hear the one-man riot goin' on upstairs. The Big Shot is having a hemorrhage."

" I'll go right up," John Keats promised quietly, " and he'll bleed to death."

But he wasn't worried about the Big Boss as he steered his way out of the morgue with Crazy Hooper at heel. He was remembering the terrace of the Hotel Metropole (last night, or a thousand and one nights ago?) and Emmerich turning at the table with his face gone the color of bone. " Von Speer and Gatreau are finished. Locked in that room up there—they have shot each other to death." And the only movement at that table was Dubail's hand jerking to touch his cheek. Touching that scar the way he had touched it again on the train out of Teutony when Stehli had mentioned forgiveness.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.



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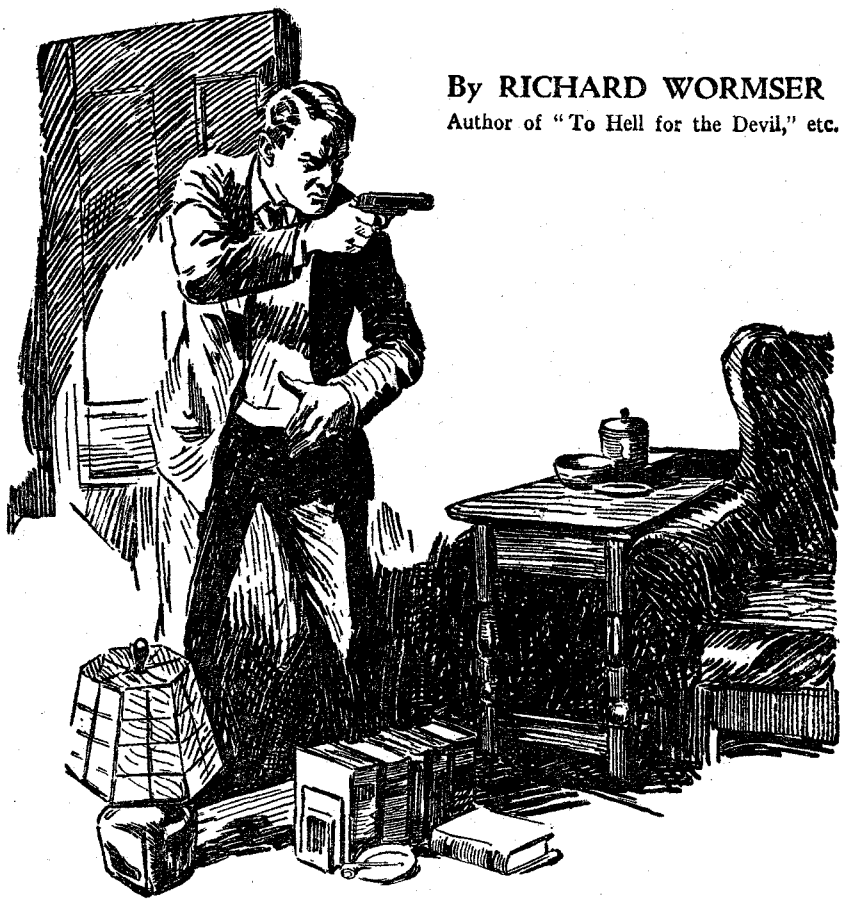
You Have to Learn Sometime



"Don't try to use your gats!"

By RICHARD WORMSER
Author of "To Hell for the Devil," etc.

Long Novelette

Detective Jimmy Lane was in line for one of the queerest jobs ever assigned an operative—he was going to college, for a purpose

CHAPTER I.

THE BIG SHOT.

YOU know how, if you're a lawyer, you can always spot another lawyer when he comes into a room? Or at least you think you can. Every business puts its mark on a man, and other people in the same business can tell it.

I saw plenty of private detectives the day Joe Cafferty and I went into the Burt

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Building to have lunch with the great Axton Burt, Jr. I saw one of them standing looking at the building register, a couple more lounging around against walls. One of the two elevator starters was a private cop, too.

car came, "Boss," I said, "how come we have a man here? All those other dicks out in the lobby didn't come from our office."

The operator cut in. "I thought you was Joe Cafferty. Mr. Cafferty, how about

"The hell we won't—"

Before the boss led me through the heavy door into a little private lobby off the main one he stopped and looked at me. "You look young enough, Jimmy," he said, finally. "You're twenty-three, kid. Remember."

Actually, I was twenty-five. I grinned and nodded. In good time, Joe would tell me what this was all about. He didn't like to talk too much.

Hank Macy, from our office, was the starter for the private elevator. After the

a job in your place? I'm sick of the guys I'm—"

He had to stop because the car had, and the door was opening. I saw that it was automatic; the operator couldn't stop it in the middle of the shaft and slug the precious Axton Burt, Jr.

When we got out, there was a young man running a switchboard, and a middle-aged woman behind him. "I'm secretary to Mr. Fisher, Mr. Burt's secretary," she said. "You wanted to see him?"

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Knowing the boss, I knew he was as annoyed as I was about the fuss and the secretary's secretary and so on. But he didn't show it. "Mr. Cafferty and Mr. Lane to have lunch with Mr. Burt."

She gave orders to the boy at the switchboard. After a while Mr. Fisher appeared. He said: "This the young man?" and looked me over as though I were an order of groceries. "Is he experienced?"

"He's been with my outfit six years," Cafferty said. "And he's had two years of night school college."

I tried not to look self conscious. But I must admit that my curiosity was aroused. It was plain that this was no ordinary job.

"Well—he looks like a college boy, anyway," Mr. Fisher said. He was a little wispy fellow, like a jockey who's grown older without putting on fat. "Mr. Burt will be out in a minute," he said.

But first, the door had to open, and two big fellows had to come out. One of them was dressed like a chauffeur, the other in plain quiet clothes, like a servant. But he looked like a prizefighter to me. He looked at the bulge that the boss's gun made on Joe Cafferty's hip; my gat was in a shoulder holster.

Fisher said: "No, Cardigan." That was a break, because if the flunky had tried to disarm the boss, there'd have been trouble. The elevator came, Cardigan went down, the elevator came back, and there was Mr. Axton Burt, Jr., joining us to get into it.

WELL, he had the famous Burt ears, as famous as the Morgan nose or the Rockefeller freckles. Except for that, you wouldn't know him. You wouldn't know that he'd spent twenty years gypping everyone who came into sight; that the rumor was that he'd at one time carried a gun and taken personal care of everyone who dared oppose him. And this, mind you, from a fellow whose father already had six or seven million. Axton, Jr., had run it up to that many hundred million, just for the hell of it.

He didn't speak, but looked closely at me, and got into the elevator. We followed him, the chauffeur followed us.

Downstairs, it was lovely; the private cops didn't jump to attention, but turned their backs, and not a flea could have come through them. If you didn't know what to look for, though, nothing had happened.

I was laughing inside. Because nobody had asked this monkey to make all the money; he hadn't needed it. And all it had brought him was this fear.

In the car, he said: "I presume you have no idea what I asked you to obtain this young man for, Mr. Cafferty?"

Joe Cafferty grinned his quiet grin, and took a picture out of his pocket. As it was passed over, I caught a glimpse of it: a young fellow, well under twenty, who looked like Burt.

The boss said: "You wrote to every agency in town. Jimmy Lane here is the only man who could fill the bill. You want him to go to college and bodyguard your boy."

Burt didn't answer. He didn't say any of the silly things that people say to detectives; I figured that he was going through Joe's process of arriving at that conclusion. He nodded, but didn't say anything more till we got to his house.

Sure, we were having lunch at Mr. Burt's home. No restaurants for him. At the table, Cardigan, dressed as a footman now, waited on Mr. Burt, and another man waited on us. He brought us—guess what—Irish stew! I started to laugh.

"What's the joke, young man?" Burt asked.

"I always thought that people like you dined on nectar and ambrosia," I said.

His smile was like a crack coming down a plaster wall. "What do you know about nectar and ambrosia?"

There was a mirror opposite me. I watched myself put on a youthful smile, under the nose that a doctor had just made for me out of what was left of mine after Fats Lafferty tested the butt of an automatic on it. I said: "The gods ate it on Mount Olympus. That is, they ate the

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nectar and drank the ambrosia. Consult Bullfinch's Mythology for further details." That nose, I thought, is what makes me look like a college boy.

He seemed pleased—not with my nose, but with my erudition. "I think he'll do, Mr. Cafferty," he said. It was just as though I weren't in the room.

Trouble was brewing. The boss's democracy was being stepped on. "Mr. Burt," Joe Cafferty said, "I didn't come here to eat stew. The Caffertys get plenty of that at home. I told you the boy would do, and the Cafferty Agency has a reputation. Now, it's up to you to sell him on the job."

"The young man will do what you tell him," Burt said.

Joe snarled: "He's my employee, and not my slave."

Burt shook his head. "I didn't mean that. But from the way he looks at you, I know—he'll do whatever you think he ought to."

I HOPE I didn't blush. I didn't dare look at the boss. It wasn't till later that it occurred to me that he had disconcerted us purposely to get an edge. He went on talking. "The job is this. My boy, Axton Third, goes to college this fall. It's a small college, but the same one my father and I went to. Valleyford, near Philadelphia. Mr. Lane, if you can pass the entrance examinations, and if my son likes you, I want you to go along. I'll pay all your expenses, and pay the Cafferty Agency, Inc., ten thousand dollars a year. In return, you must guard my boy without letting him know he's being guarded, you must pass as a college boy, you must, of course, keep up your scholastic and social standing. How about it?"

I looked at Joe Cafferty. He kept his eyes on his plate. So I spoke. "Maybe it's all right. To tell you the truth, Mr. Burt, I'm not crazy about the prospect. I'm a little older than college age; I've been working ever since I can remember. I don't know how well I could get along with a bunch of kids. I maybe would have a pretty bad time of it. Wouldn't it be better if you hired regular cops—operatives—to disguise themselves as janitors and chauffeurs and so on? The boy could carry a gun, too."

Burt said: "Let me think."

While he was silent, Joe Cafferty plucked my sleeve, and led me to one end of the dining room. "I want you to take this job, Jimmy. You're not thinking about that night nurse you had when they fixed your nose, are you?"

He knew better than that. "I don't want to go to college," I said. "I've had all the college I'll need in this business. In four years I'll be rusty at my trade."

Joe didn't answer.

Burt was through thinking. He looked at us, and we walked back. "You don't quite understand," Mr. Burt said. "The boy has to take his place in the world. He can't be educated under a stigma, marked as different from other boys."

I said: "That's the bunk. I've talked to plenty of rich kids. They like to talk to the guards at parties and weddings and so on. No matter how carefully they're brought up, boys read the newspapers. Surely, your boy knows there's a kidnaping craze on. Unless he's a fool, you can tell him that it's only temporary, that when it's over he can stop carrying a gun, stop being watched all the time."

This didn't seem to get home so well. I waited. Finally Burt spoke. "Mr. Cafferty, would you mind leaving the room? I have something I want to tell this young man."

"Whatever you can tell me you can tell my boss." I guess my jaw was sticking out by now.

Again he hesitated. "All right," he said slowly. "All right. I hoped I wouldn't have to speak this frankly—but the last month has taught me the impossibility of finding the man I want."

He stopped and looked at us. A smile went across his face, not just his mouth, but his eyes, his whole features. He was putting on charm, wrapping us in a sort of net of friendliness. I was smart enough to know he was doing it purposely, but even

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so, I felt myself thawing. When we both smiled back, he started talking.

"I have sensed," he said, "that you have both resented my wanting to investigate you more closely. But, you see, I know little about you, while you know all about me. My life is an open book."

I thought, if that were really true, you'd have been in prison long ago.

"A dozen muckraking books, and every radical magazine in the country have—well, exposed me." He smiled whimsically. "You must have read some, or all of this. Naturally, such a man—a monster, if you will—has enemies. Hundreds of them."

CAFFERTY cut in. He was unnecessarily rude, because he was trying to break out of this conspiratorial feeling that Burt had thrown over us.

"No matter how you made your dough, the fact that you've got it is honey enough for any bee of a kidnaper."

Burt smiled. "You've seen my organization. They can't hurt me. They could kill me, but any sensible man with enough money can keep his life. No. I could guard my son the same way. *But they can't hurt me.* Not up to now. Death isn't pain—it's release from pain."

I was exasperated. "Cut the philosophy and tell us what's on your mind."

Joe said: "Boy, quiet." He dropped a hand on my arm, and sat there staring at Burt.

Burt looked very old and tired. "All right. Man couldn't catch me, but nature did."

He stood up, pushing his chair from the table. Three strides took him to the window. He stood there staring out, down at the street. "My son is a fool," he said wearily. "The sort of a little fool that makes love to chambermaids and drinks the cooking sherry. Now you know."

He turned, and dropped onto a bench near the window. I saw how very old he was; older than Joe Cafferty or I could ever be. I guess a year in which you make ten million dollars ages you like ten million other years.

"Five years ago," he said, "I'd have let him leave home. I'd have done that, knowing that some one of the many, many people who hate me might take the kid, and lead him into a situation that might ruin his life. And I'd have had confidence in my money to buy him out again. But not now. I—I'm too old. I couldn't stand it."

Cafferty said: "Let's clear this up. You want Jimmy to go down there and see that none of your enemies get this kid into a spot where he'll have to marry some waitress, or where he'll be branded for life as a drunkard or worse. That's it."

Burt nodded.

"Jimmy's to be a sort of dry-nurse to this brat of yours?"

That pushed Burt too hard. "Keep a civil tongue in your head, Cafferty!" Like you would talk to a groom.

I was surprised when I slapped him. Burt reeled back, and his left hand fumbled for a gun under his coat. His left hand was reaching for a button on the wall. Then he dropped both hands and stood up. "Sorry," he said. "Considering that I wanted you to work for me as a favor, I made a fool of myself."

"You don't have to apologize to me," I said. "I'm working for you." I like a man with guts, and he had them.

CHAPTER II.

NIGHT LIFE.

IN the next few days you couldn't have told Jimmy Lane from a trained seal. Mr. Burt had to be sure what he was buying. It wouldn't have done for me to go out on the job and then get flunked out.

So he hired talent and had them put me through my paces. The first gang examined me mentally; and when they certified that I was fit to go to college, another mugg was sent out with me to buy clothes. He came back and reported my taste was O.K.

So then Mr. Burt brought this Cardigan who was his valet, bodyguard, and chief confidant up to my room, and had Cardi-

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gan jump me. I flattened him in about three minutes. So it seemed I could take care of myself, because the boss said Cardigan had been welterweight champion once.

"Cardigan," I said, "go down to the baronial cellars and get me a quart of Scotch."

He looked at Mr. Burt. Burt looked at me.

"You've tested me every other way," I said. "Now you better see if I can hold my liquor."

After the hangover cleared up, I was given two days off and told to come back with my suitcases packed as though they had come from Winchester, Illinois.

I spent the two days hanging around the office, feeling blue. I wanted to go out on a couple of jobs, but the boss wouldn't let me. Said it was too risky. I might get my forty thousand dollar nose dented.

About six o'clock on the third day I got on a bus, rode half a mile up Fifth Avenue, and climbed down again. I was wrestling with three bags, two of them bearing tags saying they'd been checked through from Winchester, Illinois.

I toted the bags down the block to Burt's home. The butler opened the door and looked me over as though he'd never seen me before. He hadn't; he'd been changed since my stay there.

"I'm Jimmy Lane," I said. I didn't use anything as theatrical as an Illinois drawl. I couldn't have kept it up for four years.

The butler said: "You're expected, Mr. Lane. Cardigan, take the gentleman's bags." Cardigan came forward, and picked up the three bags as though they were feather pillows. He didn't show any recognition, either.

THE butler led me into a drawing room on the ground floor. I'd never been in there before. There was a lady sitting in a chair before a tea table.

That's right, a lady. If Axton Burt, Jr. had been sitting there, you wouldn't think of saying there was a gentleman; you'd say a man.

The lady smiled. "I'm Mrs. Burt, Jimmy. Mr. Burt is freshening himself up; he'll be down in a moment; sit down." I did.

She said: "Have you ever been to New York before, Jimmy? You don't mind my calling you Jimmy, do you?"

"No," I said. I kept myself from saying ma'am after it. "I don't mind. I—it's mighty good of you and Mr. Burt to do this for me. I've been to New York once before, Mrs. Burt. When a man named Schneider bought the little hotel at home, he brought me on here to help him buy supplies."

"You should have come to see us," she said. "Your father and Mr. Burt were very close once."

"I saw Mr. Burt at his office." All this was prearranged.

Burt came in. We talked about Winchester; I don't know whether he'd ever been there or not. I'd gotten my dope by circuitous routes. Then the boy came in.

I'd seen his picture and knew what to expect, a tall thin boy with a hooked thin nose, and those famous thin ears. We sized each other up like two boys will. Even a private dick is human; I was thinking that this guy was going to snoot me because I was a charity patient; I guess he was thinking that I was contemptuous of him for being a hothouse flower.

Then I grinned. He smiled back at me, and when he smiled, he lost a lot of the resemblance to his father. His mouth relaxed; he looked a little silly.

I stuck out my hand: "Here's to not fighting more than once a week for the next four years."

While we were still shaking, Cardigan brought in a shaker. He poured us each a glass, and Burt gave the toast: "To old Valleyford."

We drank. "That reminds me," Burt said. "I haven't registered you yet. Get the college on the wire, will you, Jimmy?" There wasn't a servant in the room.

I called long distance, asked to speak to President Prentice, acting on Mr. Burt's instructions. The operator said she'd call me, and I hung up.

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All our glasses were empty. "Another one, Jimmy, Ax?" Mr. Burt asked.

I nodded. But Ax said no. I thought his father looked at him a little quizzically. But I didn't have time to think about that, because the phone rang. I picked it up.

"Will President Prentice's secretary do?" the operator asked. "The party you asked for is out of town."

I relayed the message to Mr. Burt. He nodded, and I said: "Yes." Then a girl's voice.

"I'm speaking for Mr. Axton Burt, Jr.," I said. "He wanted to talk to the president."

"Mr. Prentice is in Philadelphia, at a concert," this girl said. Her voice was lovely—cool without being cold, educated without being upstage. "I could have him call you when he gets back."

I asked Burt. "Mr. Burt says never mind. He just wanted to tell the college that he is enrolling another student. He says he spoke to the president about the possibility the other day."

"That will be all right," the girl in Valleyford said. "The young man can enroll when he gets here."

We said goodby to each other. I later learned that I'd been talking to Alice North—but that's getting ahead of my story.

CARDIGAN came in when I'd hung up, and announced dinner. Mr. Burt took his wife on his arm; I waited for Ax to follow them. When he didn't, I walked ahead. As I passed Cardigan at the door, I noticed him looking over my shoulder in the way soldiers and servants and convicts have—looking without seeming to look.

I twisted my head around.

Ax was standing with his head far back, and an empty glass at his lips. I looked forward again, quickly, and as I walked through the door, I heard a swift gurgling behind me.

The young punk! He turned down a drink in front of his father, and now he was sneaking at least two quick ones.

It wasn't the sneakiness I condemned nearly as much as the fact that he was sap enough to think he could fool his old man.

He caught up with me before we reached the dining room.

Cardigan stood behind the old man, and waited on him personally. The butler and the footmen served the rest of us; and the talk went around the table uneasily. Mr. Burt provided most of it, sticking to the traditions of old Valleyford.

I was trying to figure out whether Cardigan had told him yet about those extra two cocktails. I knew he would; I had figured out that the ex-pug was the old man's personal spy.

With the coffee, Ax suddenly said: "Dad, I ought to show Jimmy the sights."

"That's all right," I cut in. "I'd rather stay home and hear more about the college."

"You boys go on out," Burt said quickly. "I'll have Cardigan drive you." I knew then he wanted to see how I'd handle the boy.

At nine o'clock we took off. I had let the kid run the whole thing; partly because it was in keeping with my character of a small town Illinois boy, partly because I wanted to see what would happen.

In some way, he'd cancelled his father's order for a car. We walked together to Fifth Avenue; we had on dark blue suits, rather than dinner jackets. Very much the man of the world, Ax halted a cab.

His eyes were too bright and shiny, his thin lips too moist when he leaned forward in the light from the license frame to give the driver the address.

I caught that number at the same time I was making a mental note of the driver's license number and name. It was an address in the very East Fifties; almost in the East River. I won't be more explicit because I don't want to advertise the dump; it's a good place to stay away from.

YOU'VE heard about places that never heard of prohibition? Well, this place had never heard of repeal. All the cheap, rough tricks of the bootleg era persisted here; bad liquor, gold-digging hos-

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tesses, and the rolling of drunks for their wads. Oh, a sweet dump.

It went under the name of Jake Flynn's Stable. A horse would be ashamed to be found dead in it.

Ax didn't say anything on the way there; but he seemed to be breathing hard. I began to hate him, to be disgusted with his flabbiness.

After a while the taxi stopped with its nose almost on the iron rail that bounded the river front.

"This is the address, mister," the hackman said.

"This way, Jimmy," Ax said. He walked across the sidewalk to a door set next to a big sliding panel, like garages have. I walked along, quietly enough, but looking around. Across the street there was an English basement house remodeled into apartments. It was the type that almost always has a door into the back yard leading off the downstairs hall.

If we had to run for it, it would be safer to go that way than up the street past those cabs. Then I chuckled. I wasn't going in there as a dick; I wasn't going to do anything that would make that mob in there mad at me. We wouldn't have to run for it.

Ax pushed a button next to the little door. After a while it opened, and a man in shirt sleeves, a pipe in his mouth, came out. "Yeah?"

"I want to see Moe Gans," Ax said. I pretended not to be listening.

"I'm Moe," the pipe smoker admitted. He looked suspicious.

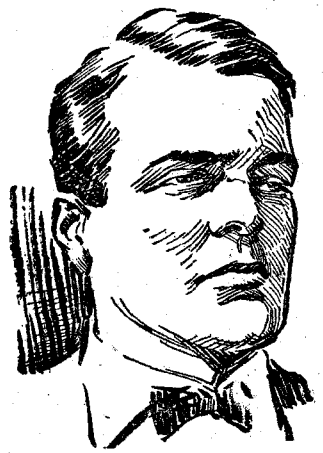
"Jim Cardigan said you were working here. He's a friend of mine."

"I know him, but he never was no friend of mine," Gans grunted. But he stepped aside. As we went past him, he added: "He knocked me colder than Eliza in a third round wunst."

WE climbed the stairs. Only when you got to the very top could you hear music; then it was no louder than a radio would have been. Gans climbed past us, and pressed a bell. "I guess they're all right," he mumbled to an eye that appeared through a hole in a door.

The eye blinked, the hole closed, the door came open. Then we went in, walking into a sudden blare of music.

Right in front of the door there was a



JIMMY LANE

little piano, with a mulatto boy pounding it. Leaning on the back of it were three girls, making a half hearted attempt at harmony. They were leaning on their elbows, and the piano top and their dress tops were low enough to give any tired business man a kick, if his business had kept him in the heart of the jungle for five years, and these were the first women he had seen since his return.

The girls all gave us their party grins. Then a dirty looking fellow in a dinner jacket jerked us to a table, and asked us confidentially what we would have.

Ax said: "Scotch."

The waiter wiped his nose on the back of his hand, and went away. There were maybe a dozen other customers in the place; it was hard to tell, there was so much tobacco smoke.

I said: "You never read about this place in the papers."

Ax giggled while I hated him for it, and admitted: "No. Cardigan happened to mention meeting Gans on the street. He was saying how low Gans had fallen, working for the worst dump in the city."

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The waiter brought back a bottle of very dubious looking Scotch, with its seal broken, and mumbled something about fifteen bucks. I would have argued; Ax gave him the dough.

"You want I should tell a couple of the girls to come over?" the waiter asked. Ax nodded.

I was revolted, and at the same time, I felt good. I was revolted because talking with Ax's mother, and with the girl in the president's office at the college had set a sort of a mood for me; to be jerked out of it so abruptly was a little sickening.

But I was set up, because I was earning my dough. If ever a boy needed a bodyguard, this was it.

The mulatto pushed his piano over, the girls leaned on it and sang. I found myself trying to look as though I wasn't a sucker; they were so flattering for the dough they expected to get.

They got it. When the number was finished, Ax handed out big bills.

THE sap had, of course, asked one of the girls to sit with us. He'd asked two, but they could see I wasn't a sugar baby; he'd only gotten one.

She was sitting very close to him, and their hands were under the table.

But sooner or later she would leave for a moment or so. I waited. She said she was going to powder her nose; she went away.

I said: "Ax, we're going to Valleyford in a day or so. I was planning on going out for some athletics. I ought to be in bed."

Then I noticed how drunk he was. He shook his head suddenly, and leaned near me. "Maryse gets off at midnight, sh' says. Gonna take her home."

I said: "Oh." Then I said: "Gotta be gone a moment." I got up, imitated a stagger, and went towards the back of the place.

Ax crowded after me: "Jimmy's drunk. Jimmy can't hold 'is liquor." I pretended not to hear.

I found the girl—as I had known I would—leaning on the bar, talking to a man. He had shoulders on him like a Hudson River boat's beam.

My .38 was where it ought to be, under my coat, snuggled close into my armpit. I edged in between the two.

The girl said quickly: "It's the apsay's enfray." Too quick for a drunk to turn the words back.

The big fellow nodded. "Son," he said softly, "I run a quiet joint here. You mind your manners, shoving in between a lady and a gent thataway."

I said, crisply: "I don't see either of the people mentioned."

Then I shoved my coat aside. They couldn't see the gat, but the barkeep could. His hand went under the mahogany, fast. But before it could connect, I'd rapped his wrist with my sights, and reholstered the gun.

Careful, now, I told myself. If they knew who Ax was, the stakes would be big enough to fight for. And they'd know that we couldn't stand publicity. I said: "I'll buy a drink—or rather my boss will. I work for—" No use saying what name I used. He was the biggest prize fight manager in the city that year. "Then the kid and I walk out," I said. "The boss won't want his best middleweight dark horse getting lushed."

They looked me over. For a moment I thought the story wasn't going to stick, and I had a taste of what the next four years were going to be; always concealing my identity, always hiding the fact that I was covering as much money as there was in one place.

Then the barkeep broke in: "Gans, on the door, said that some pug friend of his sent them."

The girl said, explosively: "That nose of yours almost fooled me."

The broad shouldered man—Flynn, if that was his name—said: "Make mine beer, Barney."

We all drank. "Send a couple of ducats around for the fights sometime, kid," Flynn said.

I went back to our table. "Ax," I said,

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" that girl says she can do a duck early if we'll meet her outside. She'll tell the boss she's sick."

AX rolled out from under the table. " Well—sure. Say, she kinda fell for me, huh, Jim? Say, you'll go on home and not wait for me, huh?" I piloted him outside. Gans held the door open for me; we made the street.

There was a cab already waiting. I put Ax into it, looked at the driver's face, and climbed in, checking that tough pan with the photograph on the license. Everything was clear, but I held my gun ready all the way home.

By keeping all the cab windows shut, I managed so that the liquor in Ax combined with the airlessness and the heat to pass him out.

The cab driver helped me up the steps with him. I was reaching for the bell when the door swung open, and Cardigan came and relieved the driver. We ran the kid up in the elevator, pulled his clothes off.

" Cold bath?" Cardigan asked.

" No. Let him sleep it off. Cardigan, that was a stinking trick of yours, sending this boy to Jake Flynn's dump. He might have been found in the river."

" That wasn't Cardigan's idea," Burt said. He was standing in the door in a purple dressing gown. I hadn't heard him come in. " It was mine. Lane, the boy has to step out sometime, and I thought, with you—"

" Shut up!" I snapped. " Drunks sometime hear more than you think." I left Cardigan to finish the disrobing of Ax, and went to my room.

CHAPTER III.

COLLEGE.

I HAD no trouble with Ax for the next day and a half, nor did I expect to. The kid was plenty scared when he woke up the next morning; I had the sneaking suspicion he didn't know what he'd done. At twenty-five I was not too old to remember how I felt at seventeen after my first night out, and most of my subsequent nights; and I'd been no sheltered violet.

But he had the guts to keep his troubles to himself, unless he confided in Cardigan. He said nothing to me, and I knew him well enough to know he wouldn't talk to his father.

I saw Joe Cafferty once before I left. We talked of this and that, and finally he said: " Kid, a smart man never wastes anything. This college thing, now. Of course, you're going down there for your half of the ten grand a year. Easy pickings. But there's no use wasting the education. You learn how college men—real college men, not night school chumps—talk, and think and so on. It'll help you."

That afternoon we started for college. We drove in a roadster, not a new one, that Mr. Burt had given us; I tooled it as far as Trenton, where we had lunch. Ax drove from then on.

" Are you going out for football, Jim?"

" Yes," I said. " I've never played much, though. Our high school didn't have much of a squad. Boxing is my best sport."

He said: " Oh. I can box a little. Cardigan—my father's valet—used to be welterweight champ. But I'm going out for freshman football. I've always wanted to be on a team." He didn't sound wistful, you see, like a kid would say: " I always wanted to ride in a Rolls Royce."

" I'll go out with you," I said. " We can rub liniment on each other's backs then."

He laughed.

" I think I'll call you Bat," I added. " Short for battle axe."

COLLEGE was—well, pretty much what you'd expect it to be. I'll admit that I was surprised, because it was so very much like the college stories I had read and the movies I had seen.

It took me about three hours to get acclimated. And then I had the set-up. These kids were all acting the way they thought they ought to—they had seen mov-

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ies too. When I got that, I was more collegiate than any of them.

So, when they told me that I had to wear a freshman cap, I revolted. You don't want the details—it was a fight, but it was pretty tame after some of the riots I'd been in—and it ended up with our licking the sophomores, and the class celebrating by all wearing white pants, supposed to be a soph privilege.

I got enough notoriety out of that and out of being half back on the class football team to get elected first frosh president. It was all pretty dull, and in a month I wished I'd never taken the job—except for Alice North. She was the girl in the president's office, and she was swell—tall, and brunette—and gracious.

Eventually, she was the reason I hated the job worse than ever. Because I had dates with her a good deal, and I felt she thought I was silly to go on being a college kid when I didn't like it, and I couldn't explain.

Bat? He wasn't much trouble. He got drunk a couple of times, but he couldn't handle his liquor, and I'd give him rope, and then lead him to bed. There was nothing to the job but the constant menace that hangs over rich kids—kidnaping.

I SMELLED trouble the day Bat and I came out of a classroom to find a bunch of our class-mates boiling around the bulletin board. We had about a city block to walk to get there; we started walking it.

The two men who were following us weren't wearing derbies, but they might just as well have been. At Eighth Avenue and Forty-second you'd never have noticed them; but they stood out like sore thumbs on a campus.

They were too fat, and their overcoats were too heavy for guns to show. But I knew they wore them. They were the type.

As we pushed in to read the bulletin board, they joined the fringe of the crowd.

It said on the board that any freshmen who wanted to go out for lacrosse should put their names on the notice, and report for practice at two-thirty that afternoon. The football season was about over by then.

Bat said: "How about it, Jimmy?"

"After you, sir." But I wasn't thinking about lacrosse. I was thinking about a more serious game than that. Those two muggs were not following us to get the latest slant on what the well-dressed millionaire will wear; they had something on their minds.

Bat was prodding my elbow. I signed the notice right under his name. The Axton Burt, III, stood out; I shouldn't have let him sign. If these gunmen were looking for prey, he ought to attract them with the greatest of ease.

The mob around the board was breaking up. By a little judicious shoving, accompanied by a constant flow of talk, I edged Bat out on the side where the two eggs weren't; then I walked him away fast.

One of the men skirted the crowd and came after us. The other one pushed farther in toward the board.

I knew then that they had come to Valleyford with the kid in mind.

But the second man hurried after the first, and caught him by the arm. He made some sort of a speech, gesturing towards the board. They both stopped walking.

We were at the door of our dorm, now. I let Bat get ahead of me, and stood just inside the door, watching two bulky figures walk away toward the Inn on the edge of the campus.

It didn't take a detective to figure out that they were going to change their plans, influenced by the fact that we were both going to be at lacrosse practice at two-thirty that afternoon.

Going up the stairs after Bat, I turned that over and over. My final decision—based on six years of studying crooks and their methods—was that they were going to case our room at that time. Getting the lay of the land.

Upstairs there was a note from Alice. She was breaking a date for that night, but if I wanted to, I could meet her after office hours and walk home, as usual. I didn't pay much attention. I was concentrating on the two men.

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It occurred to me that even if I broke this up, any future dates with Alice were out, unless I took Bat along. But I was so tense I didn't mind much, at the moment.

AT two-fifteen we started down the hill to the lacrosse field. To get there, you went over a ball field that was used for scratch games, and so on. Walking across it you could see a quarter of a mile in every direction.

No one was following us. I said: "Bat, I have to go back for a minute. I'll catch you."

"I'll go back with you."

"No." I was thinking fast. "You go down and answer my name if there's a rollcall of any sort. We don't want to get the coach sore at us."

"All right." He started off. I backtracked until I got to the first cover; a huge elm. Watching him, I could see he wasn't being followed. I began to run, heading for the dorm, praying to the gods of all good dicks that these men weren't crazy enough to try a daytime snatch at the lacrosse field. They hadn't looked crazy.

Anyway, I couldn't be more than one place at once. Always in the past I'd been where I could call for help when I needed it. I hadn't used it often, but there it was.

I stopped on our landing to get my breath. When my blood finished pounding in my ears I listened at the door; there was no one moving around inside. I went in, holding my hand under my coat, ready on the .38.

There was no one in any of the three rooms. I dropped my hand away from the gun, feeling foolish.

Then I heard someone coming up the steps outside. I backed into my little bedroom, pulling the .38; I closed the door all but a crack, and stood waiting. On second thought, I backed still farther, until I could rest my hand on my bureau; I dug the .22 out of a nest of shirts and dropped it into my side pocket.

Someone rapped on the door of the study. I didn't answer. The rap was repeated. I slid the safety off the .38.

The door into the study was opened. One of the burly men I had seen the day before stepped in; then the other.

The first one called: "Anyone home?"

I still didn't answer. They were acting just as I would have acted in their place; if anyone was here, they could say they were selling subscriptions, or getting testimonials.

The first one said: "I guess the joint's empty, Case."

Case grunted: "I guess so. Whata we do now?"

The first man said: "Wait'll we make sure." He walked to the book case, and jerked a couple of books out. "Yeah," he said after a moment. "This is the place. It says James Lane in here."

Case took off his hat and dropped it on the floor. He ran pudgy fingers through his hair. He didn't have much on top of his head, and his scalp showed greasy. "That's the punk that lives with Burt?"

I THOUGHT how easy it would be to put a bullet through his face while the other mug said: "Yes. Now what we got to do is make a list of everything in the joint."

"'At's a funny thing to send a couple of guys out on," Case grumbled.

I stepped through the door. I said: "No doubt you both carry gats. Don't try and use them."

"The hell we won't—" Case said. Then he saw the .38 in my hand and stopped. It occurred to me that this was something of a spot; what was I going to do with them now I had them? As I walked forward, slowly, quietly, I decided the thing to do was to tie them up and try and find a place to store them until I could get in touch with Joe Cafferty. He'd send a man out from Philadelphia to take them over, and my name needn't show at all.

I was even with the first man now. The .38 pointed straight between his shoulder blades, but didn't touch; if you touch a man with your gun, he can turn so quickly

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that he knocks the muzzle to one side before you can squeeze a bullet out.

I reached around very carefully, and got a gun—a huge .45—out of his holster. I put my hand inside his coat pocket to get his papers, and said: "Tell your friend Case not to do that."

The man said: "Drop it, Freddy! Do you want the punk to croak me?"

Case took his hand away from inside his coat. I tossed a fat wallet on the couch, and then moved on to Case. He carried a Police Service, and another wallet, not to mention a blackjack.

I sat down on the couch with my booty, and said: "Don't let this collitch kid make up fool either of you." The wallet had a card in it. It said that Jacob O'Brine was an operative of the Acorn Investigation Bureau. The other wallet said that Frederick Case had made a similar connection.

"O'Brine," I said, "what are a couple of agency shamuses—or, now that we're all in college, shami—doing in my room?"

Case said: "The guy that we woik for'll fire you for this, you—"

O'Brine cut in. "Don't mind Freddy. You'll find out if you keep on looking through those papers that Mr. Axton Burt, Jr. sent us down here to find out about his whelp. Whether there was any letters from dames, or bottles of liquor in his room, and so on."

I said: "Yeah?" Then I leafed through the wallet, and found a letter. It was from Mr. Fisher, Burt's secretary. It seemed genuine enough.

O'Brine said: "Mind if we go on with our work? You can hold the guns."

I thought a minute. I was just about as mad as I could be. Finally I said: "I know Muline, your boss. I work for Joe Cafferty, myself. If you two give me your words to go out of here and hop the next train for New York, I'll give you your guns back. Otherwise—"

Case said: "Yeah?"

"Otherwise I'll mail the guns and your papers to Muline in New York. That'll fix you up just fine."

O'Brine said: "We'll take it. And mister, I'd like to give Mr. Burt a piece of my mind. What'd he do, hire you to check up on us?"

"Something like that."

I gave O'Brine the papers and guns for both of them. I didn't want to trust the strong-arm, Case, any more than I had to. Afterwards I saw them, from the window, walk across the campus together.

Then Bat came in. He said there hadn't been any practice; the coach had just given them a pep talk.

It seemed funny to talk about lacrosse after what had just happened. I was still sore at the kid's father, but that wasn't the kid's fault.

I STAYED sore for a week. Then I forgot about it—I was so shocked when Bat asked Alice for a date.

This was just before the Thanksgiving break. Since I'd been scared by O'Brine and Case, I hadn't let the kid out of my sight.

This afternoon I had persuaded the kid to walk to the Administration Building with me and meet Alice when she came out.

We had to wait a few minutes. It was beginning to make me miserable to see her, because we weren't getting any place; she looked on me as a kid.

After a while she came out.

We hurried over, and took a brief case away from her; I carried it.

"Hello, Battle-Ax; hello, Jimmy. Did it take two of you to come after my briefcase?"

"We came after you, Alice," the kid said, suddenly. Both Alice and I stared at him, surprised. The boy was waking up.

He took her arm, and started up towards the house. Always before he had been willing to walk behind. It occurred to me that I was going to have my hands full pretty soon; he wasn't going to be willing to tag with me for four years.

That occurred to me, but something else did, too; the boy was a formidable rival if he wanted to be; all that money, and no inconsiderable charm to go with it.

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We walked up through the campus. "Alice," the kid said, "how about going in to Philadelphia with me tonight?"

She looked across him at me. "Surely, Ax. Why not? Jimmy never asks me to go any place."

I hadn't asked her because I had to stay near Bat. I grinned, but I felt weak.

No mention was made of inviting me along. We went on. Through trees, sending dappled shadows down. It was winter now; the boys were bundled up warmer. But the freshmen still wore their white flannels.

We came to her house. Alice ran in, waving to us; I let her go. At the top of the stairs she stopped. I ran after her; Ax had already taken a few strides away.

"Have a good time tonight, Alice."

"Why not? How's your school work going, Jim?"

"All right. This is my last weekend here for a while. I'm going to stay in New York over Thanksgiving. With the Burts."

JOE CAFFERTY

"Oh. In the servants' quarters?"

"Alice. What's gotten into you?"

"Nothing." But her eyes were cloudy. I thought, she can't be mad because I stood her up last weekend. "I never see that Dent boy any more. Is he still in school?"

"Yes. But we weren't talking about him. You don't see him because he works in the store four hours a day."

"Oh." I was two jumps ahead of her now. She said it slowly, but I knew what was coming. "How silly of him to work. I wouldn't go to college unless someone paid my way."

Then she was gone.

Was she—it seemed unbelievable—trying my system? If she wanted Bat she could have him. She was that good, certainly.

I'd resign my job. That was the courageous thing to do. If the girl would be lost, then I didn't have much faith in her or myself. I'd resign my job and go up to New York, go back to work for Joe Cafferty. I'd be in a position to marry then—no longer a kid, but a man older than she, able to support her.

WHICH brought me to the edge of the campus. I slammed open the door of the drug store, changed a five dollar bill into silver, and settled down to a long chat. I got Axton Burt, Jr. on the wire by using up a dollar's worth of change.

"Lane? Something wrong?" His voice was worried.

"Axton's all right, sir. But my conscience is hurting me. I want to quit. He hasn't given me any trouble since we got down here—none at all. He goes only with nice girls, he doesn't drink—I'm taking your money for nothing."

"That's my worry, young man. You signed on for four years. Cafferty recommended you. You stick." He was getting mad.

"But, Mr. Burt—"

"You stick, damn you. Supposing he marries one of those nice girls of yours?"

"Can't we—"

"No."

He had rung off. Swearing, I hung up the phone. I made him. He had bought everything. He wanted to buy peace of mind, too. What was my salary to him? It was small pay for knowing that his son was all right all the time.

So I slammed out of the drug store

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again. The nastiest of thoughts was rankling in my head; my orders, my duty would require that I trail Bat into Philly that night.

Trail him and watch him and Alice dancing, while I sat in a corner, a hired hand, a professional sneak. I slammed to my room, took my gun off and locked it in the drawer. I always carried it, because I was used to a gun, but it did seem silly. The feel of it in my hand recalled me to what I was.

I began to dress. I couldn't say I was happy, but I knew where I stood. You can't be a detective and a gentleman at the same time. For tonight I could drop the latter. I put my gun on again.

CHAPTER IV.

NIGHT CLUB STICKUP.

BUT it didn't work out right. I distributed Mr. Burt's money liberally over Philadelphia. The cab drivers must have thought I was a whiskerless Santa Claus. In stories you can hop into a cab, and snarl, "Tail that Checker," at the driver, and that's all there is to it. Actually, cabbies are very chary of such orders; scared they'll get into a shooting scrape, mostly.

So I rode from a hotel where I had dined at the least desirable table—to a night club, watching the tail light of the car that Burt had given his son and me.

All the way I was wondering what Bat was saying to Alice and what she was saying to him.

I shouldn't have been doing that. I should have been remembering that the man with Alice was my boss, and that I was only a bodyguard, part of the scenery.

What I'd suspected before now became something I knew. I was jealous.

That put me in a good deal of a spot. I couldn't ask her to wait almost four years while I finished a college course she didn't believe I should be taking.

Finally the ride ended. The cab driver agreeably waited in shadows until a club attendant had driven Ax's bus away; then when Bat and Alice disappeared through the door, I drove up.

If Alice and Bat saw me, it was up to me to talk my way out of a nasty hole. But before that, it was up to me not to let them see me. I thought I could manage it.

Most of the guests at the Club Maxine were in evening dress. My business suit should have made me stand out, but it didn't. For the manager promptly steered me to an almost invisible table in one corner. And luckily it wasn't too far from the table where Alice and Bat were.

There was a little pink-shaded lamp on my table. I ordered a Scotch and soda and turned the lamp off.

Almost immediately the house lights went out, and a guy in a dinner jacket that fitted him too well came on the floor, cracked three dirty jokes, and announced that La Señorita Ramlez would now dance.

Well, the fair *señorita* danced. Then the orchestra stepped in, the house lights came up, and Alice and Bat danced with the others.

The waiter brought me a note. It said:

Do I know you?
Kelly.

I tore up the note and nodded my head. After a minute or so, Kelly came to my table. "Hi, Jim." He was an op out of our Philadelphia office. "Thought you might be working, and wouldn't want to be seen. I am. There've been a bunch of stickups in this part of the City of Brotherly Love, and we got a contract to cover this joint."

"I'll tell Cafferty you're on the job." He was dying to find out what I was doing here, but it was none of his business.

I—or rather, Axton Burt, Jr.—bought Kelly a drink. Through the bottom of my first highball, I watched Bat dancing with Alice. She laughed once or twice, and once she rested her head against his shoulder.

They danced all through that period, and then the floor cleared, and the not too funny master of ceremonies came back to

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make provocative remarks about how few clothes the pulchritudinous chorus was about to wear.

"So long, Jim," Kelly said. "I got to take a gander now. These stickups are most likely to come now, when the house lights are down; I'm going out and see there's no gang concentrating in the men's room."

He walked away, a tough mug with a face like a bulldog.

The orchestra manufactured a little noisy enthusiasm, and the house lights went out. Bat was lighting Alice's cigarette. The chorus came on and made as much noise as possible.

I thought I heard a shot over the racket. It was muffled plenty, and it might have been a backfire; but I've got a trained sense of direction, and there was no street in that direction. It could have been fired inside a tiled men's room.

I HALF rose. The floor was dark, and I'd have some trouble getting out; also, I'd pretty well bottled myself up, because I'd have to pass close to Alice and Bat's table to get out.

However, the trouble came to me. The lights flashed up, and the girls froze in their tracks. I sat down again.

I slipped my head into my arms. I let it fall in such a way that I could see what was going on, but I let my whole body lie loose, as though I had passed out.

I was happy now. This was no college boy stuff, no cane rushing or football; this was marbles for keeps, and that was my game.

There were three of the mugs, all masked and gloved. One of them was just stepping away from the light switch; the other two were slowly cutting around the room. Being in a corner table, I'd be one of the first tackled by the man on my side.

I continued to slump. That's one of the hardest things there is; to lie still, perfectly relaxed, while a man with a gun walks up on you. I forced myself not to think of Kelly or of Alice. Just lie there, boy; just lie there.

The man coming towards me carried a .38; mine was that nasty little .22. But mine had eight shots.

Waiting, waiting, waiting; time can seem to stand still on an occasion like that. Waiting; a woman in the other corner of the room screamed as the man on the side was rougher than necessary in ripping away her necklace.

Waiting; and then a hand caught my shoulder. I was straightened up.

"Where d'ya carry your roll, sot?"

When I was pulled up I'd let my eyes roll up as though they were out of control; I'd been rubbing them with my hand to make them red.

The gunman was a philosopher. "You'll never know who got your dough, buddy," he said. "Then you won't begrudge it to a poor working man."

He pulled me to my feet. I stood there swaying back and forward. He grabbed my lapel in one hand to hold me up, and shot his other towards my pants pocket.

He only had two hands. While they were both busy, I used my left to let him have it in the stomach, I used the same hand to come up in an uppercut, and my right plucked the .22 from my armpit and shot under his left arm to embrace him.

Now I had the poor dope. He was half unconscious from the second punch and groaning in my ear from the first. I used him as a shield. I had eight shots in my gun and only two guns to plug.

His gun? It was behind me on the floor. When you bring your elbow down hard on a man's wrist his fingers open.

I looked straight at the man by the light switch. He had his gun up, and he was staring hard at our corner. "Drop the gun, fella," I yelled. "You're covered!"

THAT had the desired effect. He just stood there, stupefied; but the man in the other corner of the room, seeing my attention distracted, backed up and tried to hit me from the side.

So I turned, just in time, and fired high. Ordinarily, shooting at a man's head is a

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waste, especially with a short barreled .22. I missed.

But the shot sent everybody between him and me down on the floor or under tables, and my second shot was a bull's eye through the chest. He fired at the same time, but either I was quicker on the trigger, or my gunpowder was faster than his; he sat down. Even a .22 carries some shock.

The man at the door never had a chance. He concentrated too hard on me; a flying wedge of waiters hit him, and we went down, with a soup plate smashed over his head for good measure.

We couldn't have done it better if we'd rehearsed it.

Then, for the first time, it occurred to me I was in a spot. There were sure to be cops, after a mess like this; what could I tell them? Certainly not that I was a Cafferty op; that was against my client's express wishes, and contrary to every ethic and all the training of my business.

All right, then, I saw only one other thing. A Valleyford student, with a gun in his pocket at a night club.

I dropped my thoughts there and went to look for Kelly. I could have been a hero; a chorus girl kissed me on my way across the floor, and a fat lady in sequins patted my arm. But I shoved to the men's room through the crush, and fanned the door open.

The floor was slippery with Kelly's blood. There he was, gunned down; they'd gotten him as he came in. If dicks know the habits of crooks, crooks can sometimes turn tables and learn our methods.

But his heart was still beating. I shoved his handkerchief against a groove along his shoulder, and splashed water on his face; then I left, with the door still open. I wasn't going to have to tell him not to mention that I was there.

They'd find him quickly enough for medical aid with that open door. I started back for the cabaret room. Blue coats and white Sam Browne belts blocked it; the cops. I didn't go too close, at first. But I managed to look through two blue elbows.

Alice and Bat were gone! Either the kid had more sense than I thought, or Alice had told him.

I used the oldest trick in the world. When one of the plainclothesmen grabbed me and asked me what I was doing, I said that I lived across the street, and had seen all the police cars.

They threw me out for a rubberneck. It was lucky I didn't have dinner clothes on.

TO end up the story of the Club Maxine, the papers later spoke of a mysterious young stranger who had saved the day; Operative Kelly, who had been guarding the place, had spoken to him.

"I'd seen him some place before," Kelly said from his bed in the Misercordia Hospital, "but I couldn't remember his name."

That's ahead of the story, though. After they threw me out, I looked around for a cab. If one had been in sight, I'd have grabbed it. But the cab drivers had all beaten it—scared they might be held as witnesses. I started walking.

This was a pretty sparsely settled section. I passed a block of empty lots, and then I came to a block with little, identical houses, on each side. I started to cross the street, and saw a car with its headlights off.

It looked familiar. I took some steps towards it, and recognized it. It was the roadster that Bat and I shared.

I should have turned around and walked away. But there were figures inside, and I knew they'd seen me. I walked on up.

Bat's voice came out of the dark: "Hello, Jim." No word from Alice, though she was between us.

My voice would have quavered if I'd let it. "Hello, Bat. Hello, Alice."

Alice said: "We saw you. I guess—I guess we ought to congratulate you." My heart turned over inside me at the sound of her voice, cold and bitter, and hurt, hurt beyond tears.

"Thanks." The sick feeling inside me was like nothing I'd ever known before. I turned on my heel, and started away.

She didn't say anything. It was Bat's voice that called me to come back.

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"What is it, Bat?"

"Jimmy"—he sounded like the kid he was—"Alice is—she thinks—"

"Let me say it," the girl I loved cut in. "Did you follow us there tonight?"

"I—no, I didn't, that is—" What was there for me to say?

"Then you did. With a gun in your pocket. Jimmy, you were going to kill Bat or me—or both of us."

I could answer that. "No. That's crazy. Do you think I'm mad?"

"I told you, Alice." This was Bat. "Jim can explain it."

"Explain it, then," Alice said. Her voice and her body, her pale face through the gloom, all were very, very quiet.

I stood there. There was not one thing I could say. To tell Bat that his father had hired me as a guard was to violate a trust. A private dick has no right to a private life.

So I said nothing. After a moment, my feet started moving. They'd gone some way, when I heard Alice speaking again, but not to me. "Bat, you'd better write your father about this. Jim's no fit roommate for you. He's crazy. To get so insanely jealous over a girl he's never even asked—"

After all, I'm Irish. I whirled on her, and many's the time I've wished since then that I'd been stricken with paralysis of the tongue. "You conceited wench! Jealous over you. You think you could move a man to kill for you? You've been reading novels! Men don't—"

"Start the car, Axton."

They went away and left me standing there in the dark. I walked the chilly streets of Philadelphia that night, up and down, back and forth. Half an hour after I left them, my anger had evaporated, and I was lonesome. I was as alone in the world as any man could be. I didn't mind being an orphan, but I'd lost my girl—trite phrase—I'd toppled from the pinnacle my roommate had put me on, I'd come as close to violating the trust of my best friend, my benefactor, as I could.

I knew what Cafferty would say if I took the story to him. And Joe Cafferty loved me. He'd say I had no right to fall in love when I was masquerading as something I wasn't.

Now it was too late. Perhaps Alice wouldn't believe me. And even if she did, if she was at all interested in Bat—I thought she was—it wasn't fair to tell his girl that he needed a bodyguard. If she hadn't been his girl before, she would be now, on the rebound theory.

Why hadn't I told her in the first place? I knew the answer—it was because I had had a dozen easy affairs in my life, but I'd never guessed this would be so very different.

CHAPTER V.

KIDNAPED.

AT dawn I was so tired that I convinced myself that things could be fixed. I'd been happy before I took this job, and I'd been reasonably contented afterward, until I met Alice. Therefore the thing to do was to forget this puppy-love and get back to business. Burt's business or some other case. It didn't matter.

I caught a train for Valleyford. The thing stopped to throw off milk and newspapers; it took an hour or more to make the little haul. Once I fell asleep, and my dreams were worse than anything else.

The campus wasn't awake yet. I started for the dorm; better get on the job, see that Bat was all right. But maybe my left leg was longer than my right, because I described one of the prettiest arcs you'd like to see, and ended up in front of the professor's house in which Alice lived.

I knew they kept the door unlocked when she was out at night. So I tried it, and when I found it was locked, that was evidence enough she'd gotten home.

I headed for the dorm in real earnest this time. Now that I knew that Alice was all right, my conscience was hurting me pretty badly; I should have stuck on Bat's tail last night, and seen that no harm came to him.

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As I opened the door into our room, I pooh-poohed away the idea that anything could have happened. Why, this was Valleyford, Pa.; it wasn't Times Square or the Bowery. I told myself I was just a mug, and no wonder I hadn't gotten over with Alice; just a cheap gun-toting mug who'd grow up like O'Brine or Case.

Then I stepped into the study. Light streamed out; and I breathed a little easier; sure, the kid had gotten home O.K. Why, there was his hat and coat on the couch.

He must have been plastered, though, to leave the study light on. He had enough to get plastered about, from his point of view; his best friend trailing him with a gun.

I skinned out of my own coat, and dropped it next to his. I'd better take a look into his room to see he was all right, though usually we respected each other's privacy to the extent of staying out of each other's bedrooms.

Hell and havoc met my eye. The bed was torn up, the bureau had been pulled on its side, the rug was knocked into a pile in the corner. The window was open, and chilly air fluttered the curtains. The light of dawn was making the electric bulb pale.

I rushed to the open window and looked out. Cold air hit me, and nothing else; I saw the dawn and the fading stars, and no more. Then I rested my hands on the sill, and one of them scraped against a thick rope.

I jerked on the rope. My hands felt as though they had pillows tied around them, and everything I felt or saw or thought was being experienced by someone else; I was just a spectator.

The end of the rope was loose when I pulled. I forced myself to judge its weight; it must reach clear to the ground, it was so heavy. I started down it.

Every foot or so a big knot had been tied in it. Someone had made that rope into a ladder. Not just an exit; they could have slid down it for that, but a ladder with holds so that a man could go down carrying something.

I reached the ground. The rope just touched the grass under the wall. I knew then that this was a planned job.

Axton Burt, III, had been kidnaped!

AXTON BURT II'

I STOOD there gasping. My subject—and my friend—had been snatched because I had failed in my trust. I think that in that moment I hated Alice second only to myself; hated her because she had made me betray Joe Cafferty's confidence in me.

There was no phone in the dorm. I'd go downtown and phone Joe Cafferty, tell him what had happened, and offer to stand by until he could send men down to relieve me. I wasn't a dick any more; I was a kid without work.

I had walked about fifty feet when I stopped. Like hell I'd turn in my card; to run out now was to re-betray Cafferty. I'd go back and I'd get a clue, a ransom note or something, and I'd get the kid back if I got croaked doing it.

At the time I didn't think I was being melodramatic. I thought I was behaving perfectly normally.

So I climbed the long stairs to our room, and went in again, careful this time not to rub out whatever fingerprints there might be. I didn't have a fingerprint outfit with me—that's clerk's work—but I might have to call in the experts pretty soon.

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The room was chilling rapidly, since the kidnapers had left the window in the bedroom open, and I had left the door into the study the same way. I looked all over the bedroom for some sort of a ransom note, and found nothing.

That meant the kidnapers would communicate later. Would get in touch with Axton Burt, Jr. Maybe they had already, and I was sunk. I sat down on the couch, trying to figure out by the signs when Bat had come in.

I could call Alice—I was slipping. When we took our car into the garage every night, the cashier there gave us a time-stamped receipt, with the mileage, hour, amount of gas on it.

I picked up Bat's overcoat, meaning to look for this receipt. I never made the search because the inside of the overcoat was warm, and the outside chilly! Bat was only a few minutes ahead of me.

Somehow or other I was at the door, and somehow or other I had jerked my gun out. I didn't go downstairs, though, but down the hall. Remember, there were just two rooms on our entry and landing, and the other one was used by a kid named Al Dent. I thought maybe Dent had heard something.

I palmed his doorknob, and jerked the door open quickly. Then I leaped aside, because I sensed that the room was full of people; you could hear them breathe. I jumped aside and covered the door with my gun.

"I've got a .38 in my hand," I said. "I don't often miss. Come out of there one at a time, please—"

THERE was a little light in the corridor, but not enough to show me the face of the figure that came hurtling through the door at me. Because I wasn't sure—it might be Bat, and they might be throwing him at me—I didn't shoot, but I did slug the guy behind the ear with the butt of the gun.

He groaned once, and went by me, carried on by his own momentum, though he was out like a light. He hit the wall, and rolled over. Good grief, he was a student—the soph who had been at the white pants counter the day I had started the rout of the pants!

I felt sick that any college boy could be mixed up in a snatch. I stepped over his body, and started into the room, conscious that they could see me, and I couldn't see them. I was going to get shot, I knew, but the gunfire would attract help, and I ought to get one of them before I went down by shooting at the flashes in the dark.

A voice I knew called: "Don't use that gun, Lane. I'm trying to find the light switch."

Then the light went on, and I was standing there with the .38 held ready, covering a bunch of my fellow collegiates. The guy who had spoken was Spooner, the class president of the sophs.

Al Dent and Bat were tied up on the floor.

I continued to wave the gun around, but feebly.

Spooner said: "I guess the joke is off. I guess—maybe—my face is a trifle carmine."

I just stared at him.

He added, weakly: "We were going to kidnap you, Lane—as the frosh president. It was a sort of revenge for the cap riot. We were going to hold you and make your class agree to wear dinkies if we gave you back. We tied up Dent so he wouldn't warn you, and Burt because he came in first. We were waiting for you."

I swallowed. Something was caught in my throat, and suddenly I remembered that I hadn't had any sleep all night. I snarled: "You think kidnaping's a joke? What's the rope for?"

"So's the cops would think it was a real job," Spooner said. "We—we thought it would be funnier if the whole thing got in the papers."

"Oh," I said. "It's—it's a good thing I didn't shoot you. I always carry this gun—for night driving. We do, out in Illinois—near the river. I—I guess I'll go to bed."

Then I stumbled into our room. I

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flopped down on the couch and lay there, while my stomach slowly got warm again. I heard a lot of boys tumbling down the stairs, and I heard doors slam. Then Bat came in.

He started undressing in the living room, without looking at me.

As he took his necktie off, he said: "That's one for each of us."

"One what?"

"Drunk. You pulled me out of that mess in New York, and tonight I straightened it out for you with Alice. I told her you were plastered, and she finally believed it."

"Thanks, kid." Oh, swell. She thought I was a college kid who couldn't hold his liquor. But at least I still had my job. I wondered if my story about the gun had gotten over with Spooner. If I was going to stay in college to guard Bat, that would be important.

Bat said: "You needn't worry. I won't tell my old man."

"Thanks, kid."

Then he went to bed. So did I, but I was too tired to sleep. Finally, when the chapel bells were ringing for Sunday's eleven o'clock services, I dozed off, having resolved not to call Alice again, and to tell Mr. Burt I was through when he came down Wednesday to take us away for Thanksgiving.

CHAPTER VI.

THE REAL THING.

SO, on Wednesday morning, I called the president's office. Miss North was out of town, and wouldn't be in the office till after the holiday—next Monday. I started to walk to the room, and did my circular driveway stunt; I ended up right where I started, at the drug store phone booth. The professor's wife said that Alice was in New York for the holidays.

"Is this Jimmy Lane? Didn't she tell you where she was going to stop?"

"Yes," I lied, "but I thought she hadn't left yet."

This time I really did go back to the dorm.

And there was my boss, Axton Burt, Jr., sitting in his limousine, admiring the campus. The chauffeur and Cardigan, the old man's bodyguard, were sitting on the front seat.

I climbed into the car.

"Axton—Bat, he says you call him—looks fine," the old man said. "He's upstairs packing . . . You've done a good job, Lane. I'm grateful."

He wouldn't feel so grateful if he knew how easily I'd let Bat be kidnaped. "Thanks, sir. You remember, I called you? I want to quit. I don't believe that Bat's a problem child. A little normal protection would be better than this Hawkshaw business of a dick disguised as a student. It isn't going to work out."

"For an employee," Axton Burt, Jr., said, "you aren't very respectful . . . It's my money. You'll stay on the job."

"No."

"Yes." He smiled. "I'm going upstairs and see the rooms . . . Raley!"

The chauffeur said: "Yes, sir!"

"Come up with me and carry the young gentleman's bags down."

"Yes, sir!" The chauffeur followed his boss into the dorm. I sat in the back seat and brooded. I'd agreed to do this job, and if the client wouldn't release me, I was stuck. He knew I'd do my job well, rather than let Joe Cafferty down.

The door of the car opened, and Cardigan looked in. His face wasn't very much marked, considering he'd been in the prize ring so long. He said: "Come out and have a smoke."

I got out, wondering what the boss's bodyguard could have to say to me.

"O'Brine told me about getting the drop on him," Cardigan said.

"Who?" I asked. "The Acorn shamus? If you recommended him, you were cheating the boss out of dough. Cafferty's got better dicks than that pair sweeping out the office."

"You're a fresh punk," Cardigan said. "Lane, I been with the boss fifteen years.

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We wanted to check up on ya. The boss thinks he has checked—O'Brine told me you got him in a crack and stopped his investigation. Don't get too fresh."

I said: "When I have to take orders from flunkies, I'll pick the flunkies. You may have been a boxfighter once—you're nothing but a dry-nurse to a bankroll now. Get back on the front seat of the car and sit there. I don't want to lose my reputation talking to you."

He snarled but he got back. I was surprised that I still knew that sort of talk after three months of college. I wondered, too, what Cardigan had against me; I figured the boss had been praising me, and the welterweight was scared of his job.

Then the two Burts came back, and we rode to New York.

ONCE upon a time I was as good a detective operative as you'd hope to find. I didn't act like it that night, when, given the evening off by the Burts, I found myself looking for Alice North. I didn't find her, though she was undoubtedly in the city, and though I was sure that she was using her own name. I tried hotels, and I tried ticket agencies. I knew what kind of shows she'd want to go to; it should have been easy. But she hadn't reserved seats in her name.

I gave it up.

I went up to the office. I hadn't expected to see Joe there, but he was holding down the night desk, large as life.

"You work late these days, boss," I said. "Something big on?"

"No, Jimmy. Just thought you might drop in. How's tricks?"

"Not so hot. Tell you about it in a minute, but first a favor. Send out one of your insurance folders, special delivery, to Miss Alice North, care of Professor Hedges, Valleyford. Call me at Burt's when you get a response."

The insurance folder is a gag I worked out. One time I got a registered letter. Naturally, I was interested, but when I opened it, it was only an ad from an insurance agent, enclosing a blank policy. He registered it, see, to make sure it was read.

We adopted it, and added the touch of paying for a return address from the post office. That way we could trace skips, people who have moved, and left their forwarding address with a neighbor who won't spiel.

When they get the copy letter, they aren't suspicious, because insurance agents do such goofy things to get business.

The boss wrote down the address, and handed it to the night mail-and-wire clerk. Then he looked at me.

"Some doll trying to rib the money kid? Who is this North frill?"

"The president's secretary."

Joe grinned, but not in any dirty or malicious way. "I wisht I was twenty years younger, Jim."

"Burt tells me," Joe Cafferty said, idly, "you wanta quit. Why?"

"Nothing to the job," I said. "The boy's capable of taking care of himself."

"There's forty grand and expenses in it," Joe said. "And this office can use its share. What's the matter, Jim? You wanta marry this typist?"

I SHOULDN'T have thought I could fool Joe Cafferty. "What if I do? I'm old enough."

Cafferty stood up. "Son," he said. His voice was very quiet. "I helped you plenty when you needed it. Now you wanta run out on me when I need it. That five grand is just about all that comes in. I been thinking of layin' off Sarah. But go ahead. I'll not stand in your way."

"Joe," I said. "Boss! That isn't fair. You know—"

Joe Cafferty raised his hand. "I won't stand in your way. I've always taken care of myself."

"Boss—"

"Haven't you been off your job long enough? The Burts'll be wondering about you."

I left, and there was none of the old sympathy between us.

That was the last chance I got to get away. Friday night Bat and I took in a

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night club; it bored us by 2 A.M., and we went home, had a nightcap with the old man, went to bed.

I said no more about quitting. How could I? Joe Cafferty needed the money.

He didn't call me, so I guessed that he hadn't gotten a return on the insurance folder. Even special delivery can be too slow.

When I went back to Valleyford, I knew now, I wouldn't make any more attempts to see Alice. There was no use torturing myself when I knew I couldn't marry her.

Sunday night, and the old man had said nothing about relieving me. He was going to ride back to Valleyford with us. Going down in the limousine, we talked about college; Mr. Burt congratulated me on thinking up the steel cane gag which had won the cane rush for our class.

He claimed that when he was a sophomore was the first time the belfry had been greased. I didn't believe him.

We stopped at Philadelphia, and had some supper. We had to eat in an obscure dump; the Burt face was too famous to be taken into a restaurant. While we were getting back into the car, he whispered to me to fade out when we got to college; he wanted to talk to his boy.

So I was looking for a chance to drop off as we passed the railroad station at Valleyford. I saw Al Dent, and Harlan, who played quarter on the frosh football team, walking along together, and I told the Burts I wanted to speak to them. So they let me out, and the limousine went ahead.

It was a shock, so soon after being with Cafferty and all, making myself into a college boy again. But by the time we had reached the dorm, we were on the old footing, talking about football, and about whether I would be re-elected class president at the mid-years. Then Harlan left us.

AL and I stood there. We could see Burt's car, with its two uniformed men in the front seat, standing in front of the building.

"Mr. Burt doesn't know about Bat getting kidnaped, does he?" Al asked.

I said: "No. It's a good thing we hushed it up. He would have taken Bat out of college."

Al said: "It must be funny to have that much money. I wouldn't like it. Say, Jimmy, could I meet Mr. Burt?"

"Why not?" I led the kid up to the car, and made the introductions. Mr. Burt was very gracious, very much the good fellow. He told us some more about what a fine boy he was when he was at Valleyford, then Al went up.

"Bat is bringing down one of his themes to give me," Burt said, absently, "for his mother. Lane, I want to tell you again, you've done a fine job. He'll make a man yet.—I hear you've been going around a lot with one girl. Someone who works in one of the offices here."

I said, harshly: "Been setting spies on me again? O'Brine and Case didn't find out much—who you using now?"

Cardigan's head turned a little. It was the first time I'd mentioned the two Acorn dicks to the boss. It occurred to me that Cardigan must have been worried, wondering whether I'd squealed on his pals.

"I have to check up, Lane," Burt said frostily. "And—besides—I think it's about time you realized you're a Burt employee. Just like my chauffeur, just like any other worker."

"If you don't like my manner," I snarled, "fire me."

He raised a hand. "Impetuous, aren't you? Keep your job till Christmas, my boy. If Axton comes through the long holiday in New York without showing any signs of trouble, we'll talk it over. Meanwhile—be a good fellow and run see what's keeping him. I have to get back to New York." He was as cool and polite as though we'd never argued. That was one of the troubles with him; he slipped away from you when you wanted to talk a thing out, and left you nothing to do but what he wanted.

I turned and went into the dorm. Al Dent had gone up about five minutes ahead of me; the hallways were deserted. I ran up the stairs fast. Even then it seemed

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awfully quiet in the dorm. I hit our floor, and lammed into our room.

There was no one there, but the light was burning, just the way it was the night of the phony kidnaping. I called, sharply: "Bat. Hey, Bat! Your father wants to know—" All the fears and alarms of that earlier occasion were crowding me.

There was no answer. I wasn't hesitant, I didn't stand on ceremony this time. I jerked open the door of his room. He wasn't there. The window was closed, and locked. We'd locked all our windows when we went off four days before.

HIS room looked as though it hadn't been touched. I went back, moving very carefully, not touching anything that might have fingerprints on it. There was no overcoat, no hat, on either chair.

My eyes felt dry and hard, scaly. I ran my hand over them. I remember telling myself I was screwy. The kid had stopped at the washroom on the floor below.

I went downstairs very quietly, very quickly. I found myself running down the short corridor to the washroom. I remember that I used my handkerchief on its doorknob; and then I was inside.

Over in one corner there was a figure, slumped, its head in a puddle. I made my body go over there, though all the oil had frozen in my joints; I touched the figure gingerly. Yeah, the puddle was blood.

But it wasn't Bat. It was Al Dent.

I sloshed a good deal of water on him, until finally he groaned.

I said, my voice croaking: "What happened?"

"They—they didn't have to get so rough," Al groaned. "I—I was coming up the stairs. They had Bat—I saw his face—with his arms twisted behind him, with a rag in his mouth. I started to yell, and one of them cracked me on the jaw. I went down."

"How'd you get in here? How'd you mash your head?"

"They must have flung me in here. I guess I cracked my head against a washstand."

"Yeah. Guess so. Sit tight, kid."

"These were older men," Al Dent said. "Big fellows like you, only fatter. They weren't the sophs."

"No," I said. "Not this time. This isn't any joke. This is it."

And then I knew I'd been expecting Ax Burt to get snatched ever since I'd taken the job. And, like I'd said, this was it.

CHAPTER VII.

SHOWDOWN.

I HAD no excuse. All this had been foreseen, planned out by the crooks, by whoever had the boy. Any dick should be smarter than any crook, and I was supposed to be smarter than the average detective. I should have had fingerprint material in my room, I should have fixed up an elaborate system of burglar alarms and traps, there were a dozen things I should have done.

If I'd been called in to guard a rich man in New York, or Newport, or Southampton, all this would have been done. It was the college atmosphere that had ruined me, I told myself bitterly as I went down the stairs from the washroom. Me, Jimmy Lane, the ace dick of Joe Cafferty's organization, had been trying to turn himself into a college boy, a campus sheik, and this was what he got for it.

I knew there was no back way out of our dorm. And out in front—I could never forget this—sat Axton Burt, Jr., with his bodyguard and with his chauffeur. So the boy hadn't gone that way.

One of the doors on the rear of the ground floor had been jimmied. The wood was a little bit crushed next to the lock. I shoved my penknife through the bruise, and the lock snapped open. I was in a room, then, not dissimilar to our study. I found that one of the bedroom windows was open. I dropped through it.

About a hundred feet away there was one of the winding driveways that led through the campus. This was how they'd gone. But it hadn't rained in over a week,

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and the ground was firm and hard. No footprints.

I burnt a dozen matches, but I found nothing.

That left only one thing to do, so I did it. I walked around to the front of the dorm where the car was waiting. The chauffeur—I suspected that he carried a gun—and Cardigan were sitting with their heads discreetly forward, not letting on that they knew that Axton Burt, Jr., was mad about having to wait.

Burt was watching the steps of the dorm. When he heard me, his head turned; he had expected to see me come down the steps. "Where's Axton?"

I swallowed. I felt very young and very scared. "He's gone."

Cardigan's head turned a little.

"Gone?" Burt asked.

"Yes. He's kidnaped."

The word dropped into a pit that had no bottom.

Cardigan and the chauffeur both stiffened. My hand instinctively went for my gun and rested there. It wasn't my fault he'd been taken, and I wasn't going to die for it.

"They grabbed him when he went into our room." I found that I could make my voice like Joe Cafferty's. "They slugged the Dent boy when he met them on the stairs. He was alive then; Dent saw him struggle."

Burt wasn't the sort who would collapse. He sat in the back of the car almost motionless; one lifted hand restrained the chauffeur and Cardigan, was probably meant to restrain me while the great man thought. "All right," Burt said softly. "Just three boys on the floor. Right? You and Dent. . . . Dent went up before you. Cardigan, go up with Lane, get the Dent boy. This is an inside job. You two work on him till he talks."

CARDIGAN nodded. He opened the door and jumped out, facing me. There was a wicked light in his eyes. "Come on, Lane."

"Hold it," I snapped. "Dent wasn't up there long enough to do anything. Anyway, he's too badly beaten to be in on it."

"Planned," Burt said. "He planned it. If we're wrong, we'll know as soon as you and Cardigan get through with him."

"Oh, pipe down!" That was me. "You can't handle a kidnaping like you can a crooked business deal. This takes some finesse. Any noise, and the cops'll be down on us. We don't want cops—unless you're planning to bury Bat."

"You're fired," Burt roared.

"Swell," I said. "Elegant. Now that you've gotten that off your chest, what are you going to do? Give up this son and buy another one? Hell, Burt, you're acting like a spoiled baby. I don't say I can get Bat back for you, but I've got a better chance than anyone else."

Cardigan was getting behind me.

"Tell your hired pug here that if he goes one step farther, I'm going to turn and let him have it." I saw Burt's face changing. "All right, then. If that's clear, I'm in charge. They took the boy out a back window and to a car. They won't hang around here with him. Burt, your chauffeur carries a gun? I thought so. You take him and drive east. They probably didn't take him that way, because if they did they'd run into Philly, where the cops could lay a dragnet. They'd know the alarm would be given pretty quickly. But stop every place a car full of men could get a drink—not liquor, but water. You'll know what questions to ask. Ask them. Don't go more than fifty miles. They'd get thirsty before then."

I handed out no explanations. It must have sounded cockeyed, but Joe Cafferty had taught me that men leaving a crime can be spotted; they never go more than half an hour without water because the excitement and the fear make them thirsty. Many a crook's been caught because he didn't carry a canteen.

Afterwards, before Burt could ask questions, I thumbed Cardigan to me, and said: "We'll get the small car and drive west." Cardigan seemed glad to follow me.

I'd chosen the western route because

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there was only one road they could take that way. Going east, they'd soon come to a cross-roads, and be lost. But as I'd said, I didn't think they'd go east. They had no assurance that we wouldn't call the cops.

I guess it was the same campus I'd always known, with boys talking and going for sandwiches, singing and playing phonograph records, yelling to each other under the trees. But it seemed like a strange place, now. My feet moved along, my eyes probed the dark for something unexpected, and it was all part of my old world, the world of speakeasies and stool pigeons, and men who lurked in dark corners to defy the law.

We got to the garage where Bat and I kept our roadster. I climbed in, and the silent Cardigan sat next to me. We rolled out of the garage.

I twisted back on the campus, and followed the winding driveway, keeping on the left of the road, till we got to the place from which it was easiest to see our dorm. Then I stopped.

I snatched a flashlight from the side pocket, and hopped out.

At one place on the driveway, tire treads were deeper than they would have been if a car had been in motion. I paced off the distance from front to back wheel, figured in my head, and said: "O. K. A Universal Eight sedan, going west." If it had been east, I'd have called the Philly cops for a dragnet.

I hadn't before, because I wanted Burt out of the way.

Cardigan said: "O. K., Hawkshaw. You're supposed to be the doctor."

YOU won't be much interested in the next half hour of that nightmare. What we did, we stopped at every gas station and got five gallons. And every time I talked. I laid dough on the line in some places, pulled the buddy act in others, but always I got enough information to reassure me that my men hadn't stopped there.

After each gas station we stopped, and I made Cardigan let the gas we had just bought out through a cock in the bottom.

All night restaurants, gas stations, in some cases cops; I told a dozen stories, asked a hundred questions.

At the end of the half hour, no one had told me anything, but I hunched that I was right.

I made another gas station, got five more gallons and no information, and drove on into some shadows. "Out, Cardigan, and dump it." He took his wrench and climbed out.

I did, too, but quietly, and stood watching him. He'd opened that cock a dozen times, now, but he was slower than the first time. He banged at the tank reflectively, he fumbled with the wrench for the petcock, he generally messed around.

So I climbed back behind the wheel, and lit a cigarette, using the dashboard lighter. A match would have blown us higher than a kite.

Cardigan came back.

"We're pulling up on them, kid," I said. "You drive, Cardigan, and I'll use the flashlight on the side of the road. Keep her down to an even twenty."

He still didn't say anything, but he slid over behind the wheel. I shoved the light out the side of the car, and pretended to be looking at what it showed up, but I wasn't; I was watching the clock and the speedometer.

Cardigan was a good driver. He kept the needle right at twenty for seven minutes, eight minutes; then it suddenly dropped to fifteen, went up to thirty-five, to forty, dropped to twenty-five, and tried to make twenty, but failed and fell to fifteen.

"Easy, Cardigan," I muttered. "This looks like a juicy place."

He didn't answer. The needle wavered between fifteen and thirty, unsteadily.

Two minutes later—ten minutes after he'd started driving—the speedometer registered twenty again, as easy as easy.

I said, "Stop. Turn back. I think I saw something."

He stopped because he had to. But he didn't turn. He said, "You're nuts. You couldn't see anything."

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I said: "The bus we're chasing left this road somewhere in the last mile."

"You're screwy. You can't see tire treads going at twenty—"

"No," I said. "But I can see when a dirty louse who's sold out his boss gets nervous."

He jerked in the driver's seat. My gun met his in midair, but I was a little more prepared than he was, a little younger, a little quicker; my gun cracked across his knuckles, my left lashed into his face, and his revolver dropped, banged against my knees.

I SAID: "Cardigan, you'll make it easier for both of us if you tell me where your buddies were going to take the kid."

He didn't answer.

"Cardigan," I said, "the Burt money ought to be able to fix up one little-bitty killing." My gun dug into his ribs.

He said: "I'm damned if I do, and damned if I don't."

I said: "Inelegant, but accurate."

"It's a house back about a half a mile. I s'pose they ain't no use askin' if you'll make a deal?"

I took over the wheel. In the tool kit on my side there were a pair of manacles; I fastened his hands to the offside door-knob.

"No use, Cardigan," I said. "But if you come out of this alive, I'm not going to tell Burt on you. I can see what did it."

"Yeah," he said. "If I'd 'a' been your age, I'd 'a' quit. Treating yuh like you wasn't human! Actin' like just cause you worked for the louse, he owned yuh!"

I started the car up. "In case you're wondering how I tumbled, Cardigan," I said, "it was when you were so willing to go with me. You never liked me, and I figured the only reason you'd want to be out from where you could do something brave under the boss's eyes was so you could control the man who was going where the actual kidnapers had gone."

"Yeah. They was goin' to write a note sayin' how he could use me for the go-between. It was a setup."

"How you must hate my guts."

I drove the car for a mile. Cardigan didn't stop me once. I turned and drove a half a mile back towards the spot where I had taken him. "We can keep this up all night, Cardigan. Break down and talk."

"Turn around again."

I turned and drove a quarter of a mile.

Cardigan said: "Stop."

The place had been a country store once. There was a large windowed front room, its window cracked; living quarters upstairs under a gaping battered roof. But in back there was a huge shed, maybe an old store-room, maybe a place where customers used to tie their horses.

I said: "It won't get you anywhere to give me a false steer."

"I know it. This is the joint."

I unfastened his handcuffs, kicked him out, jumped on him and had his wrists fastened behind him before he could make any noise.

"You go ahead of me, sonny-boy," I said without benefit of a college accent. "And sound off."

He was a welterweight with a little extra flesh. I'm big but there was room behind him for me if I crouched over. My right hand tickled his kidneys with the .38; my left hand guided him by the handcuffs.

We went around the store, and up to the shed.

"Sound off, Cardigan."

He did. "This is Cardigan, fellas. Don't shoot."

A door opened, a voice called: "Come on, Cardigan. Make it snappy. There's a State cop been put-putting up and down the road."

I shoved Cardigan towards the light, pushed him through fast, and heard O'Brine, the Acorn dick, say something very obscene.

THEN I didn't have any time to think about anything, because Cardigan kicked out backwards as hard as he could, and got me on the shin. That couldn't have knocked me down, but my

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good sense did; I flung myself on the ground, and squeezed a bullet in the general direction of O'Brine.

O'Brine yelled again, and someone fired at me from a corner of the dark shed. But I heard Cardigan yell, and knew the bullet had gone wild; and then I went wild, too.

After a while I realized that it was very still and that I was squeezing the hammer of my gun against empty cartridges. So I stopped that and stood up.

Case had been in the corner. Case's body was there now. I guess it was he who did for Cardigan.

Funny thing, O'Brine, who had been in the center of it all, was only scratched. I took the handcuffs off Cardigan—he wasn't going any place—and put them on O'Brine.

I found Bat in one corner of the shed. There was a big welt over his skull, and his right eye carried a mouse; outside of that he was all right when I took the gag out and the ropes off.

"Gee, Jimmy," he said, "how'd you happen to come along?"

I said, wearily, "I'm a private detective. Your old man hired me to see you were all right in college. Come on, help me lug this carcass out to the car."

We folded O'Brine into the rumble seat. Bat was pretty rocky; I drove.

Halfway back to Valleyford the front tires of the car smashed into an iron chain, and State cops surrounded us, yelling and waving their big guns. It seems that by that time Burt had decided I did the whole job, and there was a dragnet out for me.

They took us back to college. Burt and President Prentice were holding court up in the room Bat and I had lived in.

Burt saw us, and ran up, grabbed Bat, hugged hell out of him. Then he turned and bawled: "Why isn't Lane in handcuffs? Take him down to the station and—"

Bat screamed: "He rescued me. Dad, he didn't—"

"You tell him, Bat," I said. I went into my bedroom and started packing. When I came out, Burt had his eyes on the floor; he handed me a slip of paper, and nobody tried to stop me.

On the train, I looked at the check. The old boy was a sport; he'd made the check out for forty grand, or what we would have made if I'd stayed on the job four years.

ABOUT a week later, Joe Cafferty said: "Kid, I got an answer to that insurance letter. Your girl was in New York at a boarding house near Columbia; now she's back in Valleyford." He tossed an envelope to me.

I let it lie on the desk for a moment. "Joe," I said, "I been going over the books."

"You got a right to," he said. "Sinking your half of the forty grand into the firm makes you a junior partner."

"Yeah," I said slowly, "but the agency never was broke. We didn't need the money on this job. How come you wanted me to take it?"

Joe fussed around lighting one of the big cigars he smokes. I sat back in my chair, playing with the letter that had Alice North's address on it.

"Well," he said, "I thought you might learn something. About how nice people act, and all."

I began to laugh. "Learn something? At college? Say, the only thing I learned was that I knew as much as most of the professors, and that I was as much a gentleman as any college—"

I broke off because Joe was grinning.

It occurred to me then—I'd been pretty dumb—that that was what Joe had been after all the time. My few months at Valleyford had wiped out an inferiority complex that I'd carried from having been an orphan, a charity case. I picked up the envelope and stuck it in my pocket. For the first time in a week I started grinning.

"Never leave loose ends around, Jimmy," the boss said. "You better go back to Valleyford and finish up."

I looked at the clock. "If I run I can make the two o'clock for Philly."

I sprinted for the door. Joe called: "Tell her she has to call me Uncle!"

I gave him the raspberry and ran for my train.

THE END

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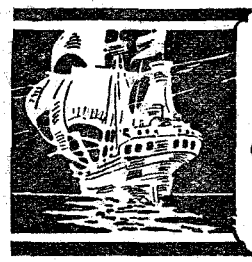

Argonotes

The Readers' Viewpoint

CONCERNING "Hell Island" (in this issue), Eustace L. Adams writes:

The story is built on a skeleton of fact. A poor egg named W—— did desert a passenger in a falling Martin bomber, during the filming of a certain movie. He never lived it down. A couple of years ago, at Cleveland, he was killed. If ever a guy had a broken heart, he did.—And it's true that there are a bunch of converted destroyers rushing bananas back and forth from Tampa to Yucatan. I've been aboard several of them in Ybor Channel.

Hell Island resembles Nevis, more than any other spot, but I have arbitrarily moved it a few hundred miles to the westward. It is about as I have described it; a place that was once fashionable, and has now gone to seed.

EUSTACE L. ADAMS.

DON'T lift her face!

Spokane, Wash.

I have just finished reading G. F. (Goofy Fiction) Worts's "Monster of the Lagoon," and believe it or not, I liked it. Although I believe Worts should have been hanged years ago for his ruthless and wholesale murderous tactics against his hapless characters, and even innocent bystanders. I have read so many of his bring-'em-back-dead atrocities that I, as an accomplice, am as deep-dyed as he. So please spare good ol' Wortie's neck; just give him a life sentence on your writers' staff (the worst of punishments).

Now that I have put a finger on him, I take time out to shake an accusing finger of wrath under your own much-punched-at nose. Dang you fellows, you leave the ARGOSY alone and quit trying to sic a bunch of brainless cranks (which most of us ARGOSY readers are) onto my favorite classics! I've read the ARGOSY in Alaska, in Mexico, in France, and in jail—ever since I have read anything—and, in my opinion (you asked for it, you know), the popularity of the said magazine is due to its spontaneous appeal. That ranges from the dry-rot telling of *Jan* in India, by Kline, to the soppy, bloodthirsty tales of Ted Roscoe, who is, if possible, an even greater murderer (on paper) than Bring-'em-back-dead Worts. I say, let the ARGOSY just continue to amble aimlessly along. Give 'er a new pair of crutches now and then, and a good, healthy kick in the seat; but don't lift her face or let her put on style.

The length of the story is immaterial, at least so far as serials are concerned; and I also enjoy the customary length novels and novelettes. In fact, my dear sirs, if you change one period or comma in the ARGOSY, you are doing so without my consent, and I'll bet a hundred thousand other old-time Argosites agree. ALFE PATTERSON.

WHAT is *your* idea of the best story (of any length, from short story to serial) published in ARGOSY since January 1, 1935? For the twelve post cards or letters from readers which, in the opinion of the editors, give the best reasons why this or that story stands out above all others, the magazine will reward the letter-writers with twelve full, yearly subscriptions. We don't want mere praise; we are interested in finding out exactly what stories you like best. Nor do we care about your literary style or skill. If there is some story that you liked so much that it stands out in your memory above all others, that is the story we want you to tell us about. It isn't necessary for you to read every story published in ARGOSY. You will have just as good a chance to win one of those twelve subscriptions if you read six of the stories published as you would if you read them all. But we must know *why* you liked the story you choose as best.

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